00094309

Digitized with financial assistance from
Shri Brihad Bhartiya Samaj
on 20 February, 2020

LETTERS FROM QUEER STREET

LETTERS FROM QUEER STREET

BEING

SOME OF THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THE LATE MR. JOHN MASON

BY

J. H. M. ABBOTT

AUTHOR OF
'TOMMY CORNSTALK,' 'AN OUTLANDER IN ENGLAND,' ETC.

94309

LONDON
ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK
1908

TO

E. C. B.

LETTERS FROM QUEER STREET

LETTER I

DEAR JIMMY,

You have never been in Queer Street, so you will hardly know where it is or what it is like; and, as for conditions of life in the delightful thoroughfare, you will be as ignorant as Paddy's pig. I don't know that such ignorance is greatly to be deplored; but, on the other hand, there is much about the dismal, picturesque slum that has a peculiar interest of its own, and many things having to do with it that are worth knowing, if you can acquire your knowledge at second hand. And, as I live there now, and am likely to live there for the rest of my days, and know pretty well all that is to be known about it, it has occurred to me that, perhaps, you would care to hear a little concerning it and its ways, and of some of the people who live in it, and what the aforesaid conditions of life in it are really like—

so I am opening a correspondence with you, in which I propose to tell you something about it.

It is true that the correspondence will be wholly one-sided. There is no post office in Queer Street, nor any letter delivery. What letters ever come to it are called for at post offices situate in more respectable localities. Writs, to be sure, and summonses get themselves delivered with a wonderful precision and pertinacity; but I verily believe that such literature would find its way to Limbo itself. Many residents in the street profess to be daily expectant of letters, which generally are supposed to be about to produce money orders and cheques—frequently oversea drafts—but it is a sad fact that such communications never actually arrive. If the people of the street ever obtain them, it is, as I have said, from some other place; and almost invariably those who receive them depart from our classic neighbourhood, either never to return (which is extremely rare), or merely for a period which is in ratio with the contents of the missives elsewhere obtained. But the G.P.O. ignores Queer Street itself. No double knock of a postman ever resounds along its narrow length, nor does any member of that industrious tribe

ever collect a Christmas box in it. Many departments of Government have to do with it—particularly those concerned with the administration of that strange abstraction, whose effects are material, called the Law—but the G.P.O. either professes to be unaware of its existence, or really is, and, in either case, the effect is the same—one gets no letters in Queer Street.

So, if you are foolish enough to reply to any or every of the series of epistles which I propose to inflict upon you, I shall never get your letters. Therefore, our correspondence must necessarily be one-sided, and you must be content to leave it at that. I have my reasons, old Jimmy, so don't think me unkind if I deliberately cut myself off from you whilst intruding myself upon you. You were always patient with me, always ready to take me as I came, always good enough to refrain from asking questions, and always content to lack the explanation which meaner mortals would have demanded as a right. And so I'm going to tell you some things about myself which I have told to no one else, am going to tell you the truth—the whole truth (as well as I can, being out of practice rather) and nothing but the truth; and you must make your own

explanations to suit yourself. I fancy that, when you have read the last word, they will be obvious enough. At any rate, you will see the reasons why I invite no response to these letters. You will adequately realize that, from the very fitness of things, it would be impossible for me to do so.

If I were the best geographer in the world I could not exactly locate Queer Street for you. As a matter of fact, I imagine that, as nearly every town in the British Empire has its Town Hall (or, as in South Africa, its Town House), so also it possesses its Queer Street. In some it is miles long, in some it may only be two houses separated by a right-of-way; but each city, town, township, village and dorp has it more or less hidden somewhere. I only write of Queer Street, London. As I have said, it has no postal recognition, but I fancy that if you were to write, say, to 'John Mason, Queer Street, London,' you would be more correct and nearer the mark in putting the symbol '?' after 'London,' than W., S.W., W.C., N.W., E.C., S.E., or E. I could not quite tell you in what part of the monstrous village it finds itself.

If I were an artist, though—a fellow who puts marks together on paper or other material,

to make a coherent representation of something or other—I could draw it for you; but I am not an artist, and all I can do is to describe its appearance, as if you were one whom I had hired to illustrate this letter.

It is a long thoroughfare, which begins fairly broadly, and gradually narrows in, until, at its farthest end, the houses nearly come together across the way. There is just room at this end for a single passenger to squeeze out into the wider world with the very greatest and most extreme difficulty. At the open end the houses are not so bad. They are, it is true, mean, and poor, and jerry-built; but they are stuccoed, and painted, and tuck-pointed in a cheaply effective way that partly disguises their real qualities. They even have porches of a bastard classic style, such as you see in Pimlico. But, as you go along, they gradually drop all pretence at external decoration, and become as plainly uniform as are those in the meaner streets of Bloomsbury—hideous, dingy repetitions of a depressing initial pattern. The further you go, the more sordid become the houses, until, quite a distance from the narrower end, they slowly merge into hovels as squalid and disgusting as any you may see behind Westminster, or off the Mile End Road.

Finally, they are made of tattered calico, and roofed with torn paper, and the wind howls through them.

At first, the roadway is comparatively clean. Further on it looks a little neglected—like Marylebone on a Sunday morning—and finally it abounds with all sorts of filth and garbage. And the atmospheric conditions of the Street are as curious as the terrestrial. Above the open end the sky is fairly clear and open. The drifting clouds draw apart occasionally to let the blue sky show itself, and there is sometimes a little sunshine (which makes the shadows blacker). Lower down there is no sunshine, but a grey sky, that always threatens rain, and yet sends none. Lower still it rains, and the wind blows coldly. But at the bottom there is always a blizzard, and it snows, and hails, and rains, and sleets in turn. The weather is never good there—it is hardly even bad. It is always dam' bad.

The houses are nearly all dwelling houses. There are no shops, except pawn-shops. There are no inns. People just live in Queer Street, and for anything they want they must go outside. The sign of the three golden balls is the only evidence of any kind of trade, or any sort of commerce, that

it can show. It is essentially a residential locality.

But the striking feature of Queer Street, the thing that renders it notable and wonderful, is its populace. Nowhere else will you find a people like the people of the Street. Nowhere else will you discover so great a diversity as amongst the units of its population. Babel was an Esperanto school compared to it lingually. Some of its citizens are truly angels. Some might have escaped from Sodom and Gomorrah. Some of the faces are saintly faces; some are those of devils from the back boundaries of the foulest hells ever invented.

All the ages of man are there. The little child, the sharp-featured and the bovine boy, the innocent girl (very rare), the handsome diabolic courtesan, the anxious unhappy mother, the sodden drunkard, the refined scholar, the fox-visaged criminal, the careless lout, the philosophically indifferent, the debased, the unfortunate, and the utterly damned—every type of visage that you could photograph and catalogue in a whole lifetime. They throng the side-walks, crowd the roadway, peer from the windows, and are framed in doors and entrances. There is the reek and the crush of

a teeming population, the clatter, and the roar, and the distressfully futile energy of a tribe that never rests and never works. And before all—pitilessly, mercilessly evident, and hideously insistent—is the type of man and woman that has a majority of all other types, the stupid, dull, hopeless, God-help-us-for-we-cannot-help-ourselves species of the genus Homo. To paraphrase the dour Thomas's remark about the population of England, 'There are so many million people in Queer Street—mostly fools.'

It would not be easy to describe the aspect of the place much more minutely. It is not easy to describe it at all. You must have lived in Queer Street to realize its 'true inwardness.' You must have dwelt among its people to know them properly. They are worth knowing, just as everything that God has made—from the Trilobite to the Hertzian wave—is worth knowing; but I can't describe them to you adequately, Jimmy, although I'm going to try and give you some notion of them. You must come and live in Queer Street to know it; but God forbid that you should ever do so. It would kill you without amusing you. It has killed me; *but it has amused me.* If it had not amused me, I would hate it and hate it.

As it is, I must confess to some liking for the squalid and beautiful, sorrowful and happy, and altogether wholly hopeless and damnable place. It has a fascination of its own; and not altogether a morbid one, either.

I think of you out there often. At the proper seasons I follow your movements. In March, for instance, I am wondering what sort of a lambing you are having. About June you are lamb-marking. In September I seem to see the hurry and bustle of shearing-time. I wonder if you have got machines yet? At rare intervals I read an Australian paper, and I always look up the weather reports, to see whether there has been rain out your way.

I wonder how you like being married? I don't think I'd like it at all. As a philosophic bachelor relative of mine, whom ye ken weel, once accounted for his single blessedness: 'I don't think I could stand seeing a strange woman about the house.'

But I dare say it suits you, old Jimmy. Everything you do suits you. I have no doubt that you are an excellent father to your infant—or are there two? Later on you will be a model parent. The rôle of 'heavy father' will be played by you with dignity and deportment. When you become a grandfather, you will be

just an ideal grandfather. Should you achieve the glory of being a great-grandfather, I'd bet my boots that you'd get a blue ribbon at any great-grandpa show. You 'have a way with you,' my James—a way that adjusts you, as a peg, to any hole you may be relegated to, be it square or circular. Knowing you aforetime, one of the very last parts I could imagine you playing would be that of a parent—yet I'll swear you are the most admirable parent that ever breathed.

I suppose that you are a Justice of the Peace by this time? Without doubt you must be a member of the Stock and Pastures Board. Maybe you'll be in the State Parliament before long. Who knows that you won't be a Representative or a Senator? And in each and every one of those more or less distinguished positions, my Hon. James, you will be a credit to the father and mother who bore you, an ornament, and a highly useful and valuable citizen. I have never been an ornament, I have never been of much use; and for the life of me I can hardly make out why you and I should always have been friends—better friends than are brothers. For we have hardly a point in common, scarcely a single characteristic or trait that we can share.

Life has been a serious business to you, a thing seldom to be taken lightly, never to be laughed at. With me it has always been a joke—and that even when it was no joke. You have your faiths, and your creeds, and your principles—I have barely got a rag of any of the three to clothe my moral nakedness; and yet we are friends, old boy, aren't we? We are such friends that, for my part, I could never bring myself to treat you as I have treated—certainly with impartiality—every other man who professed friendship for me, or whom I liked; and, to my mind, that is an enormous compliment to you. It is to be hoped you will realize it. It is also one of the reasons why you are debarred from replying to these letters.

And now I must shut up, for the coffee-shop wherein I write is doing likewise. It is raining outside and is cold, and my overcoat is at the Strasbourg Arms (which is a polite way of referring to the mansion of mine Uncle). But I have the price of a bed to-night—wherefore I am light-hearted and optimistic. So good night to you, Jimmy.

LETTER II

DEAR JIMMY,

All the wherefore and how of my coming to live in Queer Street would not merely fill up the whole of this correspondence—it would provide sufficient material for such a series of bulky and compendious volumes as *The Times* is alone able to dispose of. And I begin to realize that there is no sufficient space of time itself left to me which I might make use of in compiling an encyclopædia of the things best left undone, and those best left unknown, and of the others best left unrecorded. And, anyhow, all I want to do is to write to you from Queer Street—not to tell you, or anyone else, how best to get there. Nor do I wish particularly to make clear the dangers of the way, its pitfalls and its stumbling blocks, any more than I wish to extol the scenery and the experiences of it.

For it would all be futile, my James—all as useless as seeking to dam back the breakers

with sand ramparts on a South Pacific beach when the tide is rising. Nothing will keep those predestined to residence in it from coming to Queer Street. 'As the sparks fly upward,' as a stone sinks in water, as thistledown floats with the wind, as the very law of gravity is inevitable and uncompromising—so is it uncompromisingly inevitable that he who is born to the heritage of a villa, a flat, a tenement, a room, or a 'lean-to' in Queer Street will one day come into his own. Never was, and never will be, a falling birth-rate amongst the people of the street. Never will there be an empty dwelling, or a room unoccupied. If all the cities and the towns of the world were to disappear, there would still remain some row of caves in the chalk—damp, leaky caves, probably along some stretch of shore or river-side—most likely bleak and barren enough; or the weather side of some steep hill (the lee side would be barred to them) where God's reject would surely establish themselves in all their flashness and pathos, squalor and noisomeness, misery and—yes—even happiness. And never at all would their numbers be in any way diminished. Utopia would have its Queer Street, just as has London Town. So I am not going very fully into the aspect of the

way. I will simply try and content you with a brief narration of my pilgrimage through it —and will draw no morals, sigh no 'if onlys,' nor make myself too unduly maudlin over any 'might have beens.'

I first began to realize the imminence of my approach to the Street in this manner. Two days after a certain night—of which I have no recollection, save that my head was of an abnormal size on the subsequent morning, my desire and capacity for long draughts of cold water apparently unlimited, and that I was beset with a feeling of nausea that precluded even the most transitory contemplation of breakfast—I received a letter from the secretary of the Improbable Club. It was a terse, bald, and convincing statement, to the effect that the committee, having become of unanimous opinion that my name should be removed from the books of the club, such removal had been carried into effect; that the secretary would be glad to receive a cheque for my unpaid subscription for the current half-year, for which, under Rule CLXI., I was liable, together with the sum of £2 disbursed on my account by the head-waiter.

My head was very bad, and my temper worse, and I sent the secretary his cheque—

and learned subsequently that it was duly dishonoured by the bank. To do myself justice —a thing which I rejoice exceedingly no one else has ever fully done me—I did not suppose that the bank would so treat my draft. It had ever been due to a constitutional inability on my part to interpret the utter truthfulness of that most veracious volume, my bank-book—combined with a habit of forgetting its very existence—that had from time to time brought about unpleasantnesses of this kind, rather than any sort of design or malice aforethought. I did not know until a long time afterwards that I was still in the debt of the Improbables—though no doubt their secretary wrote me a befitting letter on the subject, and no doubt, also, the latter remains to this day at 47, Cloote Street, Pimlico, in the charge of my irate ex-landlady—unless it has returned to Piccadilly by way of the Dead-Letter Office.

As to why the committee found that the club would benefit by my withdrawal from its membership, I am really uncertain even to this day. But I have a notion that my offence was connected with the state of my health on the morning following the night in question—or I should say that my bad head and the offence itself had a common origin. When

suffering from the toxic effects of alcohol (that is to say, my unambiguous James, when very drunk) peculiar characteristics make themselves unequivocally manifest in me. I become, for one thing, most unduly combative—and combative with a recklessness that takes into account neither impossibilities nor consequences. You know that I am naturally a quiet person, with no particular taste for brawling, a dislike of noise and high words, and a deeply rooted disinclination for the more brutal forms of personal encounter. I cannot use my hands, and I have always disliked the idea of being knocked about in the face—though I should be as willing as anybody to fight a duel, and never minded the idea of being shot at after the first time or two.

But, as the poor women at the police-courts say when excusing their husbands, all that is altered when I am 'in drink.' I become, I have been told, a veritable raging lion—a sort of bravo and swashbuckler, perpetually assuming an attitude of 'do-you-bite-your-thumb-at-me-sir?' In that condition a gag and strait waistcoat are two articles of clothing which I should be provided with. You know, Jimmy, I have a bitterly insulting tongue—when I like. Sober, I don't like—drunk, it's just what

I do like to make use of. And the queer thing is that I have no subsequent recollection of what has taken place.

Often and often I have gone back next day to places where I knew I had made a fool of myself, and cunningly sought to find out whether I had been particularly offensive to anyone. Once I was punished with two excellent black eyes—and I had not the ghost of a notion afterwards as to where or how I got them, but not the slightest doubt as to the fact that they were very richly deserved. I have always deplored this unfortunate shortcoming of mine—but we are as God made us. Some men develop an altruistic instinct, after looking upon the wine when it is red; others, those having to do with good-fellowship and bonhomie; others, those relating to the reproduction of species; others, those which prompt oratory. It is my great misfortune that I 'go looking for trouble.' And it is a corollary that I am generally successful in my quest.

Well, I imagine that on that night I must have wandered into the Improbables, and, taking exception to the personal appearance of some member, or perhaps of some one of the club servants, have proceeded to state my idiotic views with all the fervour and fluency

at my command. Maybe I assaulted some one. If that is so, I trust it was the fat hall-porter, and that I did him some damage. Or it would sweeten the bitter pill if I knew I had pulled the nose of a certain bumptious stockbroker, whose presence upon earth I have always resented since becoming aware of it. And there was a County Court Judge, whose aspect was of such a kind as always seemed to me, even in sober moments, to provoke a breach of the peace—he looked as if he perpetually wanted to commit one for contempt of court.

At any rate, whoever may have been my victim that evening—and I have little doubt that some one was—he was probably very much a victim, and I must have outdone all former efforts in my treatment of him for the committee to have taken the harsh step of summarily kicking me out without calling upon me for any sort of explanation or apology. The thing was probably past both. But I wish I knew what I did or said—though neither the one nor the other could possibly have been anything that I should like overmuch to hear again.

So it was, anyhow. And thus, having become clubless, did I rapidly lose all desire for the respect of my fellows. 'Where was

my own self-respect?' I can hear you ask. Well, to be perfectly candid, my dear James, I have never in my life had a rag of it to clothe myself with. The desire to stand well in the opinion of my fellow-men—certainly—but never any notion that I could stand well in my own. I have always known myself pretty well for what I was, and have never found much cause for admiration in a dispassionate view of John Mason—his character or his aspirations. Sad, perhaps, but none the less true. To me, J. M. has ever been a somewhat reprehensible being, a poor sort of creature, a bit of a 'howler.' Plenty of excuses have I made for him, for the benefit of others, but never have I succeeded in excusing him to himself. Whatever he has done on rare occasions that may have seemed fairly decent to outsiders, I have always fathomed successfully enough, have always deduced the true motive of. When he has had a measure of praise (a very rare event) I have always whispered in his ear: 'Johnny Mason—you damned, lying, hypocrite—you know well you don't deserve it.' No, I have never had the good fortune—perhaps, indeed, the ill fortune—to be in possession of even the proverbial grain of self-respect.

There are some people, Jimmy—I believe (and it is a thing for humanity to be grateful for) that they number together a very great majority of all people—who regard being in debt as one of the most awful and terrible conditions of the social aspect of life. They not only look upon it as a misfortune worse than blindness or idiocy—they hold it to be a crime. I am not at all sure that they do not conceive it as being somewhat akin to homicidal mania, sexual perversion, or any other of those grave handicaps with which human life is so appallingly weighed. So do I. I think that imprisonment for debt should still be a strict and severe punishment. (I would also make it hot for such as too easily give credit—but that is beside the point.) If attempts to commit suicide are punishable with imprisonment—and it is constantly the case that they are—so, too, should the far more foolish proceeding of getting hopelessly into debt entail a penalty that would be both reformative and deterrent. I have attempted one and succeeded in the other, and I can say quite honestly that I had much rather the suicide had been successful than the process of getting into debt. Suicide results in something that is hidden, unknowable, inconceivable

—and therefore not so very terrible—but debt is hell. It is better to save a man from debt than from death. You can take this, old boy, as an incontrovertible truism; put it in your pipe and smoke it, and pass it on to any other idiot to whose advantage you may deem a knowledge of such truth. It will be a cheaper way of learning it than by buying it with actual experience.

I got into debt, Jimmy—the how or the wherefore, as I announced at the beginning of this letter, I haven't time or over much inclination to set forth in detail. And once being in debt, I have never been out of it, see no likelihood of being out of it, and haven't now much desire to be. I should feel, I almost fancy, most abominably lost if I were to find myself free from my liabilities. I would be something like the hard-working grocer, who toils strenuously for half a century in order to experience the bliss of retirement and a freedom from the cares of business—and then dies of sheer inaction. If I could sally forth abroad anywhere I liked, I should hardly know what to do with myself. If I could only safely accompany you on a walk through the West End of London, I should almost consider myself capable of discovering the North Pole.

There is some proverb about the man who gets into debt forging a chain to bind himself with. That is a poor and mediocre description of the limitations he manufactures. You might almost say that he digs a pit wherein he is to live at the bottom; that he goes down a thousand fathoms in a submarine that is weighted against any chance of rising to the surface again; that he builds round himself a thick-walled house without doors or windows; that he puts himself in a coffin and has it planted in a deep grave, and arranges that the earth shall be tramped down tight above him; that—indeed, that he takes any trouble to keep himself hidden away from light, and sunshine, and happiness, and life, and all that makes life worth a coster's damn. I tell you, Jimmy, I know—*I* know.

There were duns, and then there were letters, and then there were lawyers' letters. After them came writs, summonses, judgments—the whole melancholy and sordid procession of such things. Then there were borrowings from friends; infernal lies to friends; the rupture of friendships that one did not want ruptured; cuttings in the streets; the wholesale exaggerations of half-truths that somehow drifted back to one; 'Not at homes' that

meant 'Not to you, you rotter'; reproachful letters; nervous jumps at the ringing of the front-door bell; sleepless nights; booze; demoralization; loss of courage; kickings out of lodgings—in short, hell, Jimmy—complete hell. I laugh now, but I tell you I did not laugh during *that* stage of the journey to Queer Street. It was the rockiest part of the route, by a long chalk.

The first time you go into a pawnshop, my Jimmy, is decidedly an experience. You take your watch, I think, before anything else. You sally forth trying to look as if you hadn't a care in the world. You are conscious that you have seen the three golden balls hanging up everywhere, but you experience a strange difficulty in finding a shop that suits you. It is not that there are not plenty and to spare, but about each, in the beginning, there is something that you do not like. One has a most elaborate and gorgeous window filled full of jewellery, opera-glasses, timepieces, silver flasks, gold chains, diamond rings, watches of a much better sort than your own —it is far too ornate and swagger an establishment for such a humble and contrite person as yourself. Besides, it is, perhaps, in Buckingham Palace Road or Victoria Street, and there

is a great chance that you may be seen going into it by some one you know. So you pass it by.

Then there is another, with old clothes hanging up outside, and a repulsive young Hebrew in his shirt-sleeves standing in the doorway (you are not yet cognizant of those unobtrusive entrances patronized by people who are 'in the know')—and you feel that you haven't 'quite come to that.' So you wander about until you begin to experience hunger, and then you dive into the next one that you come across.

First of all, you enter the shop. After pretending to a vast amount of interest in the show-cases, you pull out your watch and mumble something about having lost your purse, or some such rot of that kind, and a supercilious young bounder, whom you wouldn't be seen dead with, says rudely, 'Pledge department—round the corner.' You observe that he doesn't call you 'sir,' but you almost feel grateful that he has not sworn at you.

So you get out and walk off, looking for some other establishment; and when you have discovered one, you carefully reconnoitre round until you find, generally up an alley way, a

mean and shabby door with 'Pledge Department' painted in dirty letters above the lintel. Various types of louts are hanging about, but you go in, and find yourself in a narrow corridor with a succession of little doors along one side. After a while you open one, and perhaps bring to light a red-nosed, frowsy woman with a bundle, who looks round and glares at you angrily. You retreat, and try your luck at another, which, maybe, is empty. And there you stand, and study a notice about the Pawnbrokers Act that is pasted on one of the wooden partitions separating your stall from those on either hand, while nobody seems to be anxious to attend to you. Up and down the counter, to left and right, you hear the tones of bargaining—on the one hand contemptuous and depreciating, on the other conciliatory, cringing, supplicatory, or abusive.

By-and-by, when you are beginning to lose your temper, a shirt-sleeved, clever-looking fellow suddenly appears before you and extends his hand. Instead of a demand as to why he has been so infernally slow, you find yourself holding out your watch. He takes it, turns it over, opens it, looks at its works, and says laconically, 'How much?' You name a sum of money at about the value you believe it to

possess. He looks at it again, glances at you scornfully, makes as if to hand it back, and names a sum which is about a sixth of that you mentioned. You are enraged at his cheek; but all the same you say 'All right,' being only conscious of an overwhelming desire to get out of the place. He takes the watch away, hands you some money, asks if you've got a ha'penny, and gives you a ticket. You scoop up the money, and turn away—probably leaving the ticket on the counter.

'Ere'—he calls you back—'don't you want this?' holding out the ticket, which you grab hastily and decamp with, conscious that he is probably of opinion that you have just picked somebody's pocket, and are most terribly anxious to get away before he telephones for a policeman.

It is a pleasant process, my James, the first time; but you get used to it—you get used to it. After a few experiences you will find yourself airily discussing the weather with the pawnbroker, or politics, or the latest capital crime. You soon get used to it. I did.

Other new and strange conditions of life begin to make themselves felt about this time. For one thing, you first understand what it is like to go without an occasional meal. You

begin to discover odd little restaurants and chop-houses, where you may 'do yourself' exceedingly well at about half the price you have been accustomed to disburse. They are really very good places—kept by Frenchmen and Italians—and generally to be found in obscure Soho byways. Later on, you find others at half the price of those, and not long afterwards, you again halve the sum necessary to provide you with a meal.

One thing about London is—you can live at the greatest expense, or you can live on next to nothing. I have heard of a five-course dinner which cost fourpence-ha'penny. It could not, of course, all be eaten at one spot, and I forget the exact menu; but I know you started off with *hors d'œuvres* that were periwinkles, and ended up with coffee at a barrow. I never tried it, because I like to feed out of a single manger, and hate shifting about from stall to stall.

I had a poor time of it, on the whole—an exceedingly poor time of it. The world I knew best, and was most at home in, disowned me. I have never disowned it, and I think I have seen it more clearly from without than within; but the process of getting outside it at first was rather an unpleasant one. Once that

stage was got through with, life became more interesting, though, to be sure, it was more trying physically.

It was a new world, even if it was a very hungry one. A new race of beings was about one. I have never thought that one class of society was much more interesting than another, except in so far as their decorative values went; but the people of Queer Street are certainly more varied than any others, and therein lies their absorbing interest. A hatful of bad coins is not so valuable and estimable as a hatful of those which have been regularly through the Mint; but you will find more variety in it, more to turn over and examine, particularly if you have not been previously well acquainted with spurious coinage.

Well, I must stop now. I am writing in the common room (very common) of a lodging-house in the Blackfriars Road. As they go, it is one of the best along here. You pay a shilling a night, and it is fairly clean in the little cubicles upstairs. Most of the customers are broken-down chaps like me. There is absolutely no credit obtainable—which is a good point—and you may stay in bed in the mornings as long as you like. The proprietor

is a stalwart, brawny person, who has been in the Marines, and is very prompt at chucking out any would-be customer who, having no monetary qualification as such, becomes unreasonable and obstreperous. I often yarn with him, and rather like him. But I will tell you about the place more fully in a later letter. Good night, old boy.

LETTER III

DEAR JIMMY,

Things became worse after what I told you in my last. The corn that was in Egypt had long become a minus quantity. That would not so much have mattered if it had not also been told upon the house-tops. The fact became notorious. It was believed that the famine was to be interminable—that, even if there ever had been any corn, there was never likely to be any again.

Now, a surprisingly vast number of people manage to exist when the treasury is empty, even when it has more liabilities than it ever had assets, and very frequently their existence is by no means an unpleasant one. Nor do they need to be Napoleons of finance. You would be surprised if you knew how many persons live in comfort, and even luxury, at the wider end of Queer Street—people who are endowed with no very great degree of intelligence, with a less degree of foresight,

and with no strategic genius whatever. It is not, my dear Jimmy, that the clever rogues are very common: it is that the damned fools are so abundant—if you come to look for the reason of this. There is hardly a thief in the world, a liar, or a swindler—be he never so dull, never so flat-headed, never so close to congenital idiocy—who cannot find his victim or his dupe. We are all fools in some respect or other, but the majority of mankind is hardly in possession of even that one redeeming ray of light which enables it to realize its liability to be made a fool of. Some mental specialists hold that we are all insane upon some point. I would invert that view, and maintain that a small proportion of us are *sane* upon some point. A successful man is very sane upon a point that the world has need of; a failure has his little bit of sanity wasted on one for which the world has no use whatever. It is not really so very wonderful that comparative luxury exists in the broad end of Queer Street. Fools pay for it, fools let it exist. If it were not for fools the Street would have a uniform narrowness, and a consistent squalor. Fools are God's mercy to Queer Street.

But though I am wise enough to know that my folly outweighs my wisdom, and though,

in these letters, I have the cheek to pass my flippant opinion upon many matters and men concerning which and whom I may, indeed, lack understanding—yet I just was wanting in the quality which would secure me lodging in the comfortable end of Queer Street, and so I slunk into it half-way, or even further, down. I had not—at first, at any rate—the faculty of obtaining credit where I had no credit, and, therefore, my first actual lodging in Queer Street was a poor one. (Of course, I had been in the street many times previously, but had never been resident, even for one night.)

My rent for my rooms had long been overdue—a matter of many weeks. My landlady was a shrewish spinster, not by any means uncomely, but possessing a temper—and the look of it—which, no doubt, accounted for her state of single blessedness. It is possible that the disappearance of many articles of a light and portable nature from the number of my household gods had, in conjunction with the fact that my arrears were so considerable, given her cause for uneasiness. At any rate, on a certain afternoon upon which I had promised payment of the thirty-four pounds odd shillings which I owed her, and having,

as usual, failed to fulfil my promise, she ascended from the depths below, and—very properly, I thought at the time—turned me out, detaining such goods and chattels as were left, until I should return with the money. I never saw her again. I never saw those goods and chattels. I only once afterwards saw the street itself. From the moment of my parting with that rather handsome termagant I was in Queer Street, and I have never since been out of it, and now never hope to be.

I possessed exactly twenty-four shillings and sixpence. As has ever been usual with me, the evil of the day was sufficiently impressed upon me to make me unmindful of the evil of the morrow. So I lit my pipe on the door-step, walked to a neighbouring tavern—the best tavern in Pimlico—and there had several drinks, and some conversation with the bar-maid. The barmaid was one of those loose-mouthed women who will talk to you upon their most private concerns, and I remember that I gave her some excellent advice—which was rather of a medical nature—and departed with a feeling that I was a useful unit in the scheme of creation, and three large whiskies-and-sodas. I can quite truthfully say that I had no anxiety or worry as to the fact that

I was homeless in London, with but one sovereign and a little silver in my left-hand pocket, a load of debt behind me, and an absolutely blank outlook before. I did not care twopence—I really did not; and, as a matter of fact, felt not a little amused and interested by the novelty of the situation.

So, by Buckingham Palace, I passed across the Green Park into Piccadilly. I had belonged to a club in Piccadilly—my ejectment from which I have already described to you—and so I did not walk directly down towards the Circus, whither I intended making my way, but, turning up into Park Lane, came by devious back routes to Bond Street, and, by that narrow bazaar, into Piccadilly again.

The stretch of roadway between Hyde Park Corner and Devonshire House has been closed to me—during the day, at any rate—from the time the Committee of the Improbable Club found that my room was preferable to my company. I have always been afraid of the fat hall-porter, even when I had—not a clear conscience, but an inward assurance of the fact that he did not know my shortcomings. Since he has necessarily become aware of the fact that I had my shortcomings—which, I fancy, he always suspected—I have never dared to

meet his protuberant and fish-like eye, and so have only passed his lair on wet and windy nights, when he was sure to be indoors, and not cynically contemplating the passers-by in Piccadilly. I have often, it is true, gazed across at night from the park railings through the big plate-glass windows of the dining-room, and tried to imagine that I did not want to be there.

I walked down Piccadilly, and at the corner, opposite Swan and Edgar's, just escaped running into Hockley, who is now commanding H.M.S. *Brimstone*, the last word in torpedo-boat destroyers. I did not want to meet him. My soul favoured solitude that afternoon; so I turned hurriedly about, and, retracing my steps to the Burlington Arcade, made my way through it to a certain gorgeous sink of iniquity —a sort of 'Stores' of somewhat glittering viciousness—which I entered, and sat myself down at one of many little marble tables that covered the carpet of a large room, traversed at one end by an American bar. Here, I thought, I shall have leisure to consider the situation.

This place had always possessed a sort of fascination for me, not necessarily a vicious fascination, though sometimes, not to be hypo-

critical, it had had that. But it was a weird panorama, a kind of morbidly interesting side-show in Vanity Fair. In the afternoons it was always full of well-dressed, often very beautiful, syrens of a class, who stood near the top of their peculiar profession.' They were well-behaved, even in their cups, and Thomas, the large and muscular 'chucker-out' in the much-befrogged military frock-coat, seldom was called upon to eject any lady of the company. I liked to sit there and watch the people—the queer people who flocked in and out, drank the evil and potent liqueurs and cocktails vended at the bar, and imagined that they were enjoying themselves.

Of the beautiful ladies there were many sorts. No class in the world is so varied, and yet so alike, as this unhappy one—no class so picturesque and yet so hideous, so attractive and so repellent. (Don't suppose, James, that I am going to favour you with a disquisition on what is called the Social Evil. I could do so most learnedly if I wished to; I only mention them here as part of the scenery in a very diverting little drama which was enacted on this particular stage on that particular afternoon.)

Besides the ladies, of course, were the clients

of the ladies, and the possible clients of the ladies. They, too, were diversely interesting. There were fat old men of intense vulgarity, loudly and expensively dressed, puffy under the eyes, fish-like as to the gills, often Hebraic as to the nose, be-diamonded and be-ringed—men whose very presence would be a pollution in the forecastle of a tramp steamer. There were young army officers, square-shouldered, flat-backed, and trimly-built, healthily bronzed in face, and easily assured in bearing. There were some who, by the slight roll of their walk, and the deeper tan in their complexions, and their even more assured carriage, were officers of the navy up on leave from Sheerness, or Chatham, or Portsmouth—and making the most of it. There were the callow, tired, limp youths you see in such force at Church Parade in Hyde Park on Sunday noontides—immaculately tailored, suggestive of infinite uselessness, and having an air of premature satiation with such pleasures as they languidly contemplated in places of this kind. (I take comfort, even, of myself when I see any of that tribe.) There were fresh-faced boys from the Universities—I saw a Rhodes scholar there whom I knew, but took care that he did not see me—sixth-form boys from the public schools, immensely

pleased with this method of vindicating their manhood; ruddy young countrymen, bookmakers, touts, pimps, cads, louts, and not a few whom one easily recognized as members of a class too vile for toleration. Furtive, cruel, wicked faces have this last sort—the sort who are not the clients of the syrens, but the harpies whom, for reasons which I never could understand, the syrens feed and clothe and house—the very lowest sort of male creature that an inscrutable Providence permits to exist.

I had ordered a bad drink, and was sitting looking on. I had been addressed several times as 'dearie,' but not feeling just then that I had any claims to the title, had succeeded in preserving an aloofness and an isolation which kept my table clear of the charmers who would have been willing to partake at it of a hospitality for which I should, as is customary, have been responsible to the waiter. Many had rustled by, but none were, so to speak, chosen.

All about they sipped drinks of many colours, smoked cigarettes, and chattered amongst themselves in half the languages of Europe. I watched their faces—the sometimes beautiful, Madonna-like faces, the sad, wistful faces, the faces of perverted innocence, and the faces of pre-ordained wickedness and sensuality—all,

or nearly all, animated with the eager expectancy of the possibility of paying rent or dressmaker that lies behind the smiles and the laughter, the sauciness, and the *insouciance* of the poor ladies who live the life, or rather live the Death, that is called—ye Gods and Little Fishes !—*Gay*. And all the time I drank cocktails at a shilling a piece, until I became absorbed in the scene about me, and altogether unmindful of the fact that my worldly wealth had come to be wholly represented by silver and copper.

I was so absorbed, so full up of moralizings, and wonderments, and the contemplation of physiognomies, and the imaginings of life-histories of the people about me (a habit that has always been mine) that it was some minutes after their arrival before I really became aware of the fact that two people had intruded upon my solitude uninvited, and were sitting upon the opposite side of my little table. Even in this place of contrasts and similarities they were, besides the mere differences in sex, so utterly unlike one another, so obviously unsuited, and so ludicrously dissimilar, that, forgetting all else, one could hardly help laughing at their very aspect.

He was a large stout man, broad of chest,

thick of neck, ponderous of belly, and with such face as you might go miles and never see the like of. It was red all over, bloated, in patches purpled with interlaced patterns of little congested bloodvessels, a trifle pimply in places, the nose bulbously crimson, the eyes small and watery. There was a double chin, and a tawny yellow moustache. An eye-glass hung from a thin black cord over the curve of his waistcoat. He sat up ponderously straight, and his puffy red hands rested on the top of a silver-mounted Malacca cane, while his fat knees were wide apart, and his spatted boots spread out about the carpet. Once upon a time—perhaps fifteen years before—he had been a tall handsome man, strongly built and active. But now brandies-and-sodas, and all sorts of assistants, had almost completed their work—the once fine frame was encumbered with mountainous rolls of coarse, unhealthy flesh, the straight features were rounded and swollen, and disfigured by the unmistakable results of years of loose debauchery, and 'the temple of his soul' was, in short, such a temple as was suggestive of all the rottenness and precariousness of a 'life' which no insurance society would 'take' at a premium of much less than 90 per cent. A hurried rush up a

flight of steps, a run to catch an omnibus, a hard body blow planted between the third and fourth waistcoat buttons, a sudden shock (if the sodden nerves could convey a real shock), would probably bring it toppling down—and then it would be necessary to plant it quickly underground, for fear of the imminent offensiveness of its decomposition. That was the man.

The girl had the face of a child—the wide-open eyes of a child that looks on a world it cannot comprehend. The clear, healthy complexion was natural; the beautiful, abundant, tawny red hair was the hair that God had given her, and of its original colour. It was a clever, pretty face—a face that you would turn round to look at anywhere, the kind of face that a man would call a good face (only women's faces are so mysteriously inscrutable), the face of a young and innocent girl that might have become the happy face of a good wife and mother. There was some weakness, perhaps, about the mouth, but the chin was firm, and the jaw oval, as it would be square in a man. She looked strong and healthy, and might have been nineteen or twenty. Her figure was good, and she was dressed quietly in some brown kind of cloth that fitted it well. Nor

was her hat of that obtrusive Gainsborough sort so much affected by the generality of ladies who patronized the place.

But it was the expression of fear—of a dread of something unknown and unexperienced, of an indefinable terror—that most held my attention. She was clearly scared about something or other. I could not be certain at first whether it was the mountain of flesh beside her of whom she stood in awe, or whether it was something outside the place that had driven her to seek a temporary refuge in this most treacherous and dangerous of harbours for such as she seemed to be. Sometimes she became as pale as a sheet of paper, sometimes, when her gaze wandered about the big, gilded room, she blushed in a way that would have been pretty outside that sink of iniquity.

The man, who always stared at her in his dull way, seemed to be densely gloating over her beauty. When he spoke she turned her head towards him, and answered in low, short sentences. I could hear nothing of their conversation. Sometimes she shook her head fearfully, and looked down at her lap. She sipped a lemon squash at intervals. He fairly guzzled brandies-and-sodas that came in rapid procession from the German waiter's tray.

After a while he shipped his monocle and leant closer to her, and talked very earnestly, and evidently very thickly. Once he put down his fat hand and tried to take hers, but she drew it away hastily. He drew his chair closer. She seemed to shrink. He was talking rapidly, and his red face had acquired a more uniform tinge of purple. I leaned back in my chair, smoking cigarettes, and began to get interested in the pantomimic drama, as it was to me, going on on the other side of the little table.

Suddenly he lurched closer, grasped her hand in his, and whispered something. She looked straight up at me, and did not seem to see me.

If ever there was despair and fear in a human countenance it was in her pretty face. Her parted lips quivered, her bosom heaved, and, as I looked, two great tears rolled down her cheeks. He had her grasped tightly by the wrist. She made no effort to withdraw her hand. He seemed to be pressing insistently some proposition upon her. Her wide eyes looked unseeingly into mine. And then, suddenly, she gave the unhappiest little moan in the world, and dropped them to the ground. All about, the chatter, and the inane laughter,

and the bartering, and drinking blended itself into a sort of rattling, jingling, falsetto hum.

For the life of me, old Jimmy, I couldn't stand it. The one thing that has always broken me up is the sight of a woman crying. If there had been any women whom I could have seen crying when I began to take the turnings for Queer Street, I think, really, that I never should have landed in it. So I grasped the water-bottle about the neck, and leaned across the little table till my face was quite close to his—till I could smell his brandy-wine breath—and half whispered, half yelled at him:

'*You damned swine!*'

You should have seen him! He gave a gasping sort of grunt, glared at me for a second or two, went a shade purpler in the face, dropped her hand, rose unsteadily to his feet—as I rose, too—gaped with his mouth wide open, made as if he would come at me with the Malacca, seemed to perceive me lift the long-necked water-bottle—turned unsteadily, and made for the door, close to which we had been sitting. His nerves had failed him.

I followed, and came out into the short passage just as he lumbered through the doorway on to the pavement, and made heavily for a hansom that was drawn up opposite. The

obsequious Thomas closed the doors, shouted to the cabby, 'Land and Water Club!' and turned and beheld me standing with the water-bottle in my hand. He knew me well enough.

'Good life, sir, what's up?' he gasped. 'What's the matter with the General? Who's been a-goin' for him?'

I am a ready liar in emergency, and I assured Thomas that the subject of his inquiries had turned faint, and that I had followed him to the door with the water in case he collapsed. This was plausible enough, as I had seen that nobody inside seemed to have observed the affair—it was so quick and sudden, and they were all occupied with their own villainies.

'Lord! I thought he'd bin 'avin' some sort of a row, sir. That's General ——, and he's one of our best customers. But it'd 'a-bin as much as 'e dared to get into any sort of a mix-up 'ere. I used to be in 'is regiment, and Lady —— she *do* wear the breeches, sir! 'E looked scared to death. I made sure some one 'ad bin 'avin' a row with 'im.'

I had heard his name. Three days after I read in a paper, two days old, that the gallant officer had expired suddenly at his club just before dinner on that evening.

So you see, Jimmy, I have to add to my sins that of having killed a man over a girl—and a girl who was in such a place as the Cornwall Café! But, for the life of me, I've never been able to feel sorry that he died. He is better dead. I'm only glad that I did not strike him. It was probably the shock of being called 'a damned swine,' combined with many hundred gallons of brandy-and-soda, that finally caused his fatty degenerate heart to strike work after years of overtaxing in the task of keeping his tallowy carcase flushed with blood.

I gave Thomas twopence and the water-bottle, and turned to go out. As I passed along the pavement I felt myself touched gently on the arm, and turned to look into the white face of the girl who had been sitting beside the General. She whispered in a hurried kind of way:

'Oh, do come and speak to me for a moment—I do want to speak to you. Please, do come!'

Now I hadn't driven the old buck away, after the manner of Primitive Man, in order to collar his woman, and I was feeling that I was a bit of an ass, as it was, and pretty sick of myself—as I always have been after having

flared up in my mad sort of way. So I hesitated, and I looked at her to see what she was driving at. She was very pretty, and very white, and still looked scared to death—so, always having been a fool, and having a reputation as such to live up to, I turned, and made as if to go back to the Cornwall.

'No, no,' she said hurriedly, laying her gloved hand on my arm to detain me, 'not back there. Anywhere—not there. Come into one of the parks. Where's the nearest? I *do* want to talk to you, *so* much. Do come —*please*. I want you to. Do come—*please*.'

I reflected that I hadn't a home now, and might just as well go with her and sit on a bench under a tree as drink cocktails elsewhere till I became drunk and bankrupt together. So I said: 'All right. I don't mind. Let's go into St. James's.'

She said nothing, but walked along beside me as we went through the Arcade again, and down Piccadilly towards the Circus. I saw Mallowe coming out of the Albany, but he was ahead of us by a few yards, and did not see us. Any way, it did not matter. There was nothing loud or remarkable about her; and if he had, he would just have lifted his hat and gone away.

So we went down Regent Street and past the Athenæum Club, and by the Duke of York's monument—the old boy who marched his men up the hill and down again—and turned into the Park. She never spoke all the way, and seemed to be so preoccupied and scared together that she nearly got run over in Piccadilly Circus, and would have been if I hadn't hauled her back from under a horse's head just in the nick of time. We walked down the path that leads to the Duck Bridge —that pretty little causeway from which you see one of the loveliest bits of London. But we turned up to the left before we came to the bridge, along the bank of the Lake, and sat down on an empty seat under a great big spreading green tree that was fresh and clean in its garments of early June. She said nothing for a while.

But I must stop now, and in my next letter I'll tell you how I compensated for slaying the General. It was one of the few decent things I have ever done—and it makes me feel more futile than ever when I think now that it was useless. But perhaps it wasn't—God knows.

So good night, old Jimmy.

LETTER IV

DEAR JIMMY,

Let me see—where was I? Oh yes—we had got into St. James's Park, and were sitting on a bench by the water-side.

That corner of the Park is very beautiful in springtime. It is just where the pathway takes a bend along the coast of the lake, and opposite to that little island into which the artillery discharges its salutes on royal feast-days. The water laps against the pathway, and all day long little boys catch Lilliputian fish, which they intern in empty pickle-bottles. Ducks and waterfowl conduct every kind of fleet manœuvre in the offing. All about is the splendid foliage of the English trees—we have nothing like it at home. Behind are the smooth lawns, and the gracious slopes of soft green turf, and the flower-beds. Long shadows lie across the grass as the sun goes down in the evening. There are patches and streaks of golden light that filter through the

leaves on to the pathways. Prosperous people pass by. Nursemaids hurry solemn little kiddies (as only the English kiddie can be solemn) home to tea. Old stout chaps sit around on chairs, reading evening papers. People who have no very definite ideas as to where they are going to pass the night rest on the seats, which are free, against the hard time to come when the parks will be all closed, and there is no single outdoor part of London where a homeless man may sit and rest his weary limbs. (Don't I know it!) Odd couples, like my new friend and myself, occupy adjacent chairs, and seem to discuss singularly important affairs—or not to discuss anything, and to take all things for granted; or to quarrel; or to be bored with one another.

We sat silently for some time—I wondering what she wanted, and why she didn't say something; she tapping the ground with one pointed brown-shoed little foot, and making a series of holes in the path with the end of her parasol. After five minutes of this sort of thing I said, 'Well?'

'Well' is about as irritating a word as you can shove out to anyone who wants you to open a conversation. I thought it might draw her. She looked up, and I could see that her

eyes were full of tears, and guessed that her voice would be full of sobs, and she didn't want to own it. I began to feel pretty fatherly to her.

So I said, 'Well, what's the trouble? Do you want to tell me? Go ahead—I'm listening.'

She had been fishing in her pocket for something, and held out a rather crumpled and soiled letter in an envelope.

'Read that,' she whispered; 'it's from my sister.'

I took it, and glanced at the envelope before taking the letter out. It was addressed to 'Miss Doris Cane, Long Farm, Dartmoor.' I've never been in Devonshire, so don't know quite where that is. I was pretty mystified, generally, by this time. Ladies whose acquaintance one made at the Cornwall did not, as a rule, ask one to join them in contemplating the beauties of the London parks, while they passed the time weeping. Nor did they take you into their confidence to the extent of showing you their home correspondence. The subject of 'home' was usually one which was pretty rigorously taboo with them. I was fairly puzzled. She looked at me gravely, and said:

'Read it, please. It will explain. I can't.'

So I opened the highly ornamental grey paper, which had an embossed 'Phyllis' in a circle in one corner, and a flying sparrow, with a worm in his beak, in the other. The letter was written in a sprawling female hand, in queer, jerky little sentences.

4, Bellerophon Mansions,
'Gray's Inn Road, W.C.

'My dear Dorry,

'Make up your mind. Try and come next week. I have found just the thing for you. A kind friend, General ——, has offered to make you his secretary. You will live with me, and have a good time. The General is a dear. Be sure and come. It is a chance of a lifetime. I am getting on awfully well. You will never want to go back, once you are here. Ta-ta—best love. Be sure and come.

'Your loving sister,
'Phyl.'

When I had read it, I said 'Well?' again. She went red this time, and looked prettier than ever.

'Oh, I thought you would understand,' she said, looking down, and making channels in the pathway with the toe of her shoe.

'So you came?' I said, rather lamely.

'Yes—I came; and my sister'—she hesitated—'did you see a tall girl with fair hair sitting between us and the bar? Well, that was Phyllis, and I wish she was dead,' she added, with a ferocity for which I would not have given her credit.

But I'm too lazy, Jimmy, to report that conversation verbatim, though I remember it well enough. It seemed that the sister, having been a dressmaker in some little tin-pot, one-horse place down in Devonshire, had come to London to go in for some job in one of those swell mantle-shops, or whatever they are called, that cluster about the country back of Regent Street, and in the purlieus of Bond Street—don't know which it was—and shove up a sign bearing a single French Christian name, and occasionally figure in the County Courts, and the newspapers, when they sue countesses or actresses for garments which those ladies say don't fit 'em. Her job was that of a kind of lay figure—she exhibited costumes and creations upon her elegant frame, thereby inducing the actresses and the Countesses to order something of the same kind.

Well, anyhow—it's rather a poor sort of yarn, so I won't go into details—she became

not only no better than she ought to have been, but, as the sequel shows, a damned sight worse. The fat and loathsome General—who, if there is a hell of the conventional description, must be making a pretty remarkable grease-spot in it at the present moment—after a while became her 'friend.' All the time her people at home thought she had become at least boss of the mantle-show. She was always trying to induce Doris to come to London and live with her, and at last, as the immediate result of the letter above, succeeded in doing so. What her object was is pretty plain. So Doris came to be a secretary, and wasn't long in discovering that that yarn was 'all my eye.' Things happened and happened, until the old beast of a General fetched the girl, under some pretence or other, into that God-forsaken Cornwall Café.

There, as I told you in my last, certain other things happened, and now here we were, Doris and I, and a rather tragic situation. Fancy me being shoved into the position of a sort of knight-errant,—being suddenly called upon to 'cuss' a bad old man, to rescue a pretty girl, and, hardest task of the lot, to dispose of her when rescued! Considering that my capital was on the worse side of sixteen

shillings by this time, the problem that presented itself was not without a knotty point or two, was it? However, I did my little best. I fear that if she had not looked so pretty, and had not had hair of the sort I most admire, things might have been different.

'Well now, look here,' I asked her—'what do you want to do? Go back to Gray's Inn Road?'

'Oh no, *no!*' she cried; 'I never want to see Phyllis any more. I want to go home,—I *do* want to go home—back to the farm. I hate this London—and I thought I should like it *so* much, Oh no, I *must* go home. I don't know anyone in London but Phyllis and the General, and I wish they were both dead —I *do!*' She began to cry softly again, and I sat tight, and did a lot of hard thinking,

What on earth could I do? She had no money. My whole available funds amounted to fifteen and ninepence. I was pretty well cut off from the rest of the world by this time, and had no friends I could get to look after her. Vague thoughts of the Salvation Army crossed my mind; but I didn't know how to go about approaching them, didn't even know where their offices were. I couldn't marry the girl on fifteen bob. For the same reason I

couldn't adopt her as a sister. If she stayed in London, she would inevitably go to the devil. She didn't altogether look the sort who could make a long struggle, and anyway, with a face like hers, she wouldn't long be spared.

I tell you, Jimmy, it was the first time in my life I had ever been up against what is called 'moral responsibility,' and I tell you, also, I didn't like it. I didn't feel up to it, quite.

Well, there was only one thing. 'Come along,' I said.

'Where?' she asked hesitatingly.

'Paddington,' I replied, with grim resolution. 'I'm going to send you home—like a parcel.'

They must have lied to her pretty constantly at the Bellerophon establishment, for I could see she was hardly sure that I wasn't getting at her too. She refused to go in a cab, so we walked up Regent Street, and caught a 'bus' in Oxford Street, and landed out at Praed Street in due course. I didn't say much to her, because I was feeling pretty sick at the idea of having to pay her fare. But I bought her ticket, and gave her two shillings, and that left me with exactly ninepence in copper. And the worst of it was, she didn't know I was almost

worse off than she, and took it all for granted that I was a kind of fairy-dropped-from-the-skies sort of Johnny. But, as her train went, she thanked me very prettily, and waved to me along the platform, and, to some extent, I felt fairly noble and all that.

At any rate, I thought to myself, 'Well, I've saved you from the General, and the she-devil of a sister, and I hope you'll be good and happy, and keep clear of London, and get married, and become a mother, and all that; and I suppose that fifteen bob will help to balance my account with the Recording Angel a little—and I might have done worse.'

Three weeks after that, James—I give you my solemn word—I saw her, and the yellow-haired Phyllis, and two awful bounders—Yids by the look of them—coming out of a Leicester Square restaurant after midnight, and getting into a four-wheeler. Oh, *hell!*

But I was not to see into the future, so I went out of the great bustling station, feeling, my James, pretty good, virtuous, and Sir Galahadish. The contemplation of my own nobility occupied my mind as I walked down the Edgware Road towards the Marble Arch. By the time I came to Oxford Street I was completely unmindful of my impoverishment,

and wholly filled with the self-satisfaction which has always beset me subsequent to the few occasions when I have done anything of a decent nature—that is, of a comparatively decent nature.

So, as quite an ordinary thing, I went into a tavern in Old Quebec Street, and refreshed myself with a whisky and Apollinaris. It was not until I had paid out to the barmaid seven of the nine coppers that I became aware again of the extremity of my poverty. So I went out feeling rather cheap and foolish. It was about dinner-time, and I was beginning to realize the fact.

I crossed the road, and went into Hyde Park. From the bandstand, near Rotten Row, strains of music rose and fell in the still evening air. I strolled aimlessly across the wide open space that lies between the Marble Arch and the Row. One might as well go without dinner to the accompaniment of good music as without any consolation at all. I had often spent summer evenings in the Park, listening to the band, and the sound of it was friendly and consoling just now. It would shut out the interminable roar and hum of London that even here, where one might almost be unconscious of the monster's exist-

ence—so quiet and peaceful did everything seem—never ceased or rested.

Quiet people lay about on the grass. Red-coated Guardsmen did what I believe is termed a 'cop on' (made an acquaintance) with pretty little housemaids having their night out. Elderly people sported with dogs of divers descriptions, throwing their walking-sticks for them to chase and bark at. Children ran about and screeched at one another. Over all was stealing the soft indistinctness of the later twilight. The lamps in the bandstand already shone out brightly through the dense foliage of the surrounding trees.

I came to the encircling green chairs, which were crowded with people, and sat down, glad to rest, and smoke, and listen to the music. Almost immediately came a park-keeper and collected a penny from me. I had again forgotten my indigent circumstances, and now, between me and a cold, callous, and unsympathetic world stood the magnificent sum of one penny, and I had become very hungry.

Thus, my James, did I come 'right down to it.' Thus did I realize for the first time what it was to be without money, without friends, and without hope in London. Truly, that was an occasion—just as the first time

one wore trousers, smoked a pipe, went under fire, shot a man, or did anything notable or unusual. It was borne in upon me with vivid force that here sat I, Johnny Mason—done, done, done—versus the whole world. There were between six and seven million people in the vast city about me, and not one that really cared a straw for the fact that I was dinnerless, bedless, and moneyless on this night. In truth, there were some who would be not merely careless of the fact, but even positively glad, did they know it, that I was in such narrow straits, and of decided opinion that it very well served me right. With which opinion I have always myself been wholly in agreement.

'Carmen' was succeeded by 'The Turkish Patrol.' Air after air blared and fluted and tinkled under the canopy of the bandstand, and I sat there smoking until the lights went out, and the crowd broke up and drifted away towards the Park gates and outlets. Then my tobacco was done, and I drifted, too, towards Hyde Park Corner.

Piccadilly roared and rushed with its night traffic. The clubs blazed with light. There was Royalty at Devonshire House. I walked slowly along the Green Park railings. Passing the cabmen's shelter, I was aware of the rattle

of cups and saucers, whiffed a scent of hot coffee, and wished that I were a cabman. I saw one or two people sitting in the windows of the Improbable Club. One of them I knew and disliked. I was glad that he did not know how I slunk hungry in the street below. Cabs and motor-cars rolled up and down, and by-and-by I came wandering again to the Circus. I wondered if Doris were home now. Hardly, I thought. I wondered if she felt at all grateful. The mere thought of her, and of her being safe, somehow stimulated me. I was walking about hungry because I had saved a human soul. I wasn't such a waster, after all.

I was tired now—a little foot-weary. But there was no place where I could sit down and rest for a while—nowhere except public-houses, and there was nothing in a public-house that I could buy for a penny, and therefore no way of paying for my footing, or rather for my seating. So I wandered slowly through Leicester Square, saw the lights of the Empire and the Alhambra blazing and sparkling, mingled with the wonderful crowd that throngs those pavements at night, thought of Thackeray and 'Esmond' as I passed 'the Fields,' drifted down by the National Portrait Gallery, and

so came aimlessly to Trafalgar Square. The great column towered up into dim obscurity; the lions and the bronze statesmen and soldiers on foot and horseback stood out of the gloom stolidly. The fresh green of the small trees along the Gallery side were all lit up by the big electric lights, and cast strong black shadows on the pavement. On every hand was the rush of London night life, everywhere the sound, and the scent, and the buzz of it.

I thought I would go and sit down on one of the seats of the Embankment and work out some plan of action, some means by which the situation might be redeemed, some solution of the difficult problem of how and where to pass the night. It had not yet dawned upon me that to-night, at any rate, there could be no solution—I would have to pass it out of doors. That did not come for an hour or so.

So I passed down Northumberland Avenue, between the great red Constitutional Club and the vast hotels that line the other side, and came to the river. It was a high tide, and the oily waters stretched widely to the Surrey shore. The reflections of countless lights danced and glimmered in the placid mirror; black clusters of barges floated, ponderous and massive, beyond the fairway. The waters went

'lap, lap' against the stonework below one's feet.

And then it commenced to rain. I can tell you, Jimmy, I just began to feel bored then—to experience a kind of resentment against I hardly knew what—the fat General, Doris, her yellow-haired sister, my late landlady, London, the shelterless Embankment, the river (because it was already wet, I suppose), and the whole scheme of creation.

'Fur Gawd's sake, guv'nor, 'old 'ard!' The voice came after me as I turned to walk away. I stopped and looked round.

A most miserable and repellent individual shuffled up close to me. He was unshaven for many days, had a thin, pinched face, a bent body, great gleaming eyes, clothes of an incredible dirtiness and raggedness, a toe showing through a broken boot, and he shivered as he begged.

'Fur Gawd's sake, mister, gimme a copper. I got two, en if I git one more I kin get a doss. It'll kill me if I'm out ternight—s'elp me it will. 'Ere—you'll think of 'ow you've saved a bloke's life, guv'nor, ternight—w'en yer at 'ome in bed. S'elp me, I'll die if I 'ave to walk abart ternight.'

He broke off, and coughed till I could almost

fancy I heard his ribs rattle and his spine click. Then he spat on the ground, and I saw that he spat blood. He was a miserable devil, so I gave him a penny, and he shuffled off. And as I slowly followed in the direction he went, for lack of another, I remembered myself again, and, for all my sorriness for the consumptive beggar and concern as to my own situation, I could only stop and laugh.

LETTER V

DEAR JIMMY,

You know—it wasn't really so funny being out in the rain without a copper to bless oneself with—but, in spite of the fact that the front part of my body seemed to be sagging in against my backbone, by reason of the emptiness of the region immediately below it, and that I was desperately tired and rather footsore, I could not but cackle and laugh over the easy way in which I had come to part with the very last fraction of my financial resources. The whole series of adventures which had finally reduced me to penury were too grotesque to be regarded solemnly.

First of all there was Doris. It was the colour of her hair, I am sure, which had led me on to play the Knight Errant. I might delude myself, if I chose, with the notion that the motive which had prompted me to pay her fare down into Devonshire was conceived in the real nobility of character that underlay its

weakness and its folly. I might pat myself on the back and soliloquize as to my real goodness, and feel sorry, for its own sake, that the rest of the world did not know what a fine chap I actually was. I could picture the Recording Angel sticking down at least one entry on the credit side of the ledger devoted to the good and the bad of Jack Mason. I could delude myself, as I had so often succeeded in doing, into a belief that that unhappy scallywag was a sadly misunderstood and underappreciated being. But I could not get away from the fact that if Doris had been a nigger woman, or had had flaxen tresses instead of auburn, or a squint, or a Cockney accent, or a hunch back—I should in all probability have calmly looked on while the iniquitous General worked his wicked will, and never had the ghost of a notion of spending my last precious pieces of silver in an effort to ensure her salvation. It would have been none of my business —but the beautiful hair made it seem the natural, the only, the inevitable thing to do.

Then there was the balance of ninepence. To airily breast the bar of a public-house and command a drink of the value of sevenpence, while two pennyworth of bitter beer would have answered as well, was, under the circum-

stances, distinctly improvident. But I had not, somehow, realized that the treasure chest was practically empty. I realized it immediately afterwards; but in half an hour I was spending the moiety of my fortune at the bandstand in the luxury of a green chair which I really did not require—the grass, or one of the public benches, would have done me just as well. And here, now, in the rain, I had given my very last penny to a decrepit devil whom it would have been merciful to assist in rupturing a bloodvessel with his cough—merely because he had spat a gout of blood on the pavement not as large as the penny itself. 'Well,' I said to John Mason, 'you are a blighting idiot.' The whole series of calamitous benevolences caused me to reflect—as I have often done when it was too late—after the manner of the little boy at the Sunday-school bun-fight when the missionary box had been passed round, 'A fool and his money are soon parted.'

Well, it rained—not the usual thin London drizzle, but a downpour that came in sheets, splashed and sizzled on the side walks, dimmed the great incandescent globes, and hissed into the river with an appalling venom. I ran towards the Charing Cross railway-bridge—Hungerford

Bridge, I think they call it—for shelter, and almost threw myself in the darkness at the foot of one of the piers that support it on either side of the Embankment roadway.

There were black shadows, infinitely sombre and impenetrable after the glare of the electric lights and the gas lights along the stone parapet by the river-side, and I could see nothing. But I barged into a soft body, and immediately was smitten with such force upon the breast bone that I staggered out into the slush, and nearly measured my length in it.

'Blarst yer, carnt yer watch w'ere y' goin'?' growled a husky voice from the gloom. Uncomplimentary remarks as to my appearance, anathemas on my existence, and hopes for my speedy dissolution ran up and down an unseen rank of men standing back in the shadows against the piers. I tried to see into the gloom, but it was only when I regained the pavement that I was properly aware of a crouching line of woebegone beings who huddled and shivered in the bleak, leaky shelter of the bridge.

'If I wasn't afraid o' losin' me place, I'd come out there an' learn yer manners, y' swine,' growled the voice of him whom I had charged, and whom I took to be the fellow who had

struck me in the chest. 'I'd learn yer t' come shovin' in.'

There was righteous indignation in the tone, and unambiguous hostility, and it was echoed by a raucous murmur, in the fashion of a chorus, by those who crouched beside. Clearly, I had got myself disliked, and, as I did not see where else I could seek shelter during the downpour, I thought that it behoved me to apologize as graciously as possible.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't see anyone there—I didn't know I was running into anyone. I beg your pardon.'

'Oh 'ell!' whined a thin voice from obscurity, 'another o' they bleedin' toffs. There ain't 'ardly room on the bloomin' 'Bankment for these 'ere sons o' gentlemen. Git out, youse blokes, an' give my lord elber room!'

A pitiful cackle of broken-down mirth greeted this sally. I tried ineffectually to make out the speaker. From somewhere else along the line a quavering treble took up the objurgatory, 'Welcome, stranger.'

''Ave a keb, m' lud—tike a 'ansom. Blime, y'll be gettin' y' patent leathers muddied. Won't 'is vally carry on? Not arf! 'Ow's 'er lydyship—*an*' th' kids? W'ere d' ye think 'is 'ighness wants ter git, Tommy? Belgrive

Square? Bust my boots, tho', p'raps it's th' King out for a constitooshnal. Are y' waitin' for y' kerridge, y' Majesty? It won't be long —I seen th' coachman 'avin' a pint o' four-arf at th' 'Orse Guards 'arf 'n 'our ago. Jest mike y'self at 'ome. Y'll be in bed at Buck'nam Palace be two o'clock, 'avin' a rum 'ot. Cheer up!'

'Buckin-em Palace,' contemptuously interpolated a deep bass—'Bow Street.'

I stood and wondered—stupidly fascinated by the run of sarcastic comment in the gloom —what kind of midnight gathering I had stumbled into. It was not for a minute or two—with the splash from the dripping girders leaking down upon me as I stood peering into the darkness—that I realized that these gentlemen were my fellow-lodgers for the night, my companions in adversity, they who also were to enjoy to-night the hospitality of the Wide World Hotel. They were my bed-fellows, my dear comrades; they constituted the social circle in which I moved, were to walk by my side, share my sorrows, exchange ideas with me, show me the way. And I, too, owed them something. So I stepped closer up, that we might become the better acquainted, and realized that the odour which emanated from

them was not an agreeable one. The mirthless chaff continued.

'Ere,' hoarsely gasped a voice in front of me that seemed to be familiar; 'ere, get to 'ell out of this.' It was the rat who had had my last penny.

I thought it was time to register my name in the books of the Wide World Hotel, so I reached into the darkness and took the owner of the voice by the collar of his coat, and pulled him out of his place, and threw him behind into the roadway. He was miserably light and weak, and as I let him go I could feel his coat tear about the neck. He sprawled in the mud, choking and gasping and coughing, and I slipped into his place. Instantly there was a hubbub. They all seemed to snarl at me; I was pushed and jostled. The man whom I had run into raised his hoarse voice above the others: 'Sling the —— out; break his ——, ——ing 'ead! Out th' swine.'

There was a sort of shuffling surge about me—it couldn't be called a rush—a sound of hoarse breathing, a concentration of the smell of dirt and greasiness, a sudden calm, and then the sound of a great voice, the click of its shutter, and the sudden startling glare of a bull's-eye lantern.

'Now then, now then—wot's all this? Wot's all this? I tell you wot, my jokers, you'll get moved along out into the rain if you can't keep quiet. Seems to me some of you chaps ain't so badly off as you want to make out if you can start scrappin' 'ere like this. You mind yourselves, now.'

He shut off the light, and swung away into the darkness, the glisten of the electric globes outside gleaming wetly on his oilskin cape.

'Mind yourselves, now,' came back over his shoulder, as he tramped away on his beat, the embodiment of the Law's majesty.

The asthmatic riot had ceased magically. I was cursed in a spasmodic way for ten minutes, until an unfortunate devil up the line had some sort of a fit, and filled the air with gasping, choking groans that did not add much to the cheerfulness of it all, and, to my astonishment, a woman screamed. Whereat some one admonished her: 'Ow, shet up, Liz; d'ye wanter bring th' bloomin' copper back?' Came a torrent of filthy language in a weak, shrewish, complaining voice. (That made me feel a bit sick, Jimmy—it wasn't nice to think of a woman being here in such a crowd as this.) Her curses and obscenity ended in a sniffle and a succession of sobs, and every now and

again, for a long time after, she protested feebly that one Bill was an ensanguined person who was born out of wedlock—only she did not quite put it in those words.

For another hour the pitiless rain pelted down. The gutters rushed in front of us in a miniature flood. The wet pavements to right and left hissed with splashing rain-drops. Through the damp leaves of the plane-trees, and along the pavements, shone the lights. From Westminster way chimed the quarter-hours, and—after many years—Big Ben boomed out two o'clock, and was echoed all over the night by other bells. (Few of the London clocks seem to agree within a minute or two.) Sometimes a cab rolled Westwards—a tired editor-man making home from Fleet Street, probably, after having 'put the paper to bed.' Twice motor-cars splashed by, rushing rapidly Eastward. After a while, the big policeman who had intervened in the demonstration against myself came squelching back, and flashed his lantern, as he passed, along the line of the dismal parade. By its warm light I caught momentary glimpses of my fellows.

It was a weird series of impressionist flash-light pictures. On one side of me stood a tall, gaunt man with stooping shoulders, his

unshaven chin huddled down into the upturned collar of a faded tweed jacket, hands plunged deep in his pockets, a worn cloth cap pulled over his eyes. On the other was a little foxy-faced fellow, whose teeth chattered always, and who shuffled his feet perpetually. The whole irregular line was illumined momentarily as the constable marched by—an uneasy eddy undulating along it as its weary units flinched back from the bright glare. A murmur of muttered curses sighed in the wake of its bearer. Somehow, it reminded me of a line of tucked-up horses as they used to look in Africa, picketed in the rain on a wet outpost night. A man, who had gone to sleep, fell outward on to the pavement, and lay there a little while, until some one shuffled out and kicked him.

I began to think of that night near Carolina, when No. 4 Troop did outpost duty on the little ridge above the creek. You remember the time when the Boers drove us in, in the early dawn, and 'Buggy' Martin got shot through the back, and you slung him across your saddle, and carried him off successfully? How it rained, and how our carbines blazed and flashed in the moist grey twilight! What a 'slop' of a night it had been! The attack

in the morning seemed more like a cheerful piece of friendly attention than a hostile demonstration. And I thought of how we buried 'Buggy' later in the day, and how that unspeakable cad, Captain Sampson, read the service over his entirely inadequate grave, and pretended to break down—the damned crocodile! I wonder what has become of the waster? I wish *he* had been shot, instead of poor old 'Buggy.'

The miserable night wore on, and, as the first pale light of the new day imperceptibly dissolved the darkness, the rain ceased. With the characteristic inconsistency of London weather, the grey canopy of clouds began to break and drift apart, and patches of pale blue sky showed through the rifts, and grew wider and wider, until the first rays of the rising sun began to gild the roofs and chimney-pots. The heavens were almost clear, and only fleece-like tufts and fragments of cloud chased one another in the high air-currents.

As the light grew stronger, my fellow lodgers drifted away singly and in couples. The woman crouched on her knees against the pier, asleep—a limp caricature of her sex, infinitely pitiful and infinitely disgusting. Perhaps she had been handsome once—like Doris—but now

she was indescribably hideous. Lank wisps of thin iron-grey hair straggled from under a battered straw hat—and I noticed that the narrow dingy ribbon about the crown was inscribed, in faded gold letters, 'H.M.S. *Majestic*' —and fell in damp disorder over the huddled shoulders, and about the pale, Death's-head travesty of a face. It was white and colourless, save where dirt and grime toned it, as it were, to its surroundings. So still she crouched, and her lips looked so blue, and the bowed head so rigid, that, as I passed her, I thought for a moment she must be dead, and touched her gently on the shoulder. She lifted up her sad, dishonoured head, and named me as she had named her friend Bill in the darkness of a couple of hours before. I fled.

Aimlessly, hungrily, and wearily I loafed along the river-side towards Westminster. I felt weak now. The first sharp gnawings of keen hunger had passed—you remember how it felt in the Veldt?—and there was that slack sense of bodily feebleness and mental acuteness that goes with a long empty stomach. Every little passing incident seemed clearer cut and more distinct than usual—trifling monotonous things stood out boldly. And all the scenery resolved itself into irrelevant

considerations of the price of a breakfast. You recollect how we used to talk in Africa—as the Brigade rode rationless in the early mornings—about the things we would like to have to eat, the courses we would choose in the selection of a breakfast?

There, on the Thames Embankment, as I loafed along, I looked at different things, and wished that I had the cost of them. And they were quite trivial things—a chimney cowl worth a few shillings, a lifebuoy and a coil of rope hanging on the parapet, a wire doormat in a doorway, the iron work about one of the little trees. They were luxurious, superfluous things, that nobody would miss much, whose absence would not affect history at all. A smoky chimney, a new lifebuoy, a little mud in a hall, a more picturesque tree. But if I took one, and sold it, it would provide a little more life for me, a bath, a clean collar, some amount of strength, power to go back and assist the poor forlorn drab whom I had left crouching below the railway-bridge.

And thus, Jimmy, does one get lawless impulses, thus do people come to steal for hunger's sake. I never stole, but it was a moral cowardice that restrained me—by no means was it any sense of the immorality of

theft. Self-preservation is a stern law—a sterner law, and a more imperative, than any made by man. And it's not so long since the time when I would have been hanged if I'd collared the lifebuoy or the doormat, being an hungered! Never, old Jimmy—if you are a J.P.—be too rough, when you are on the bench, on a poor devil who has stolen to fill his belly.

The light grew stronger, and I came to Westminster Bridge, and Big Ben boomed out four o'clock. By the statue of Boadicea (Boudicca, as it explains in the inscription) I passed, and I thought that the lines graven on the pedestal—

> *'Regions Cæsar never knew*
> *Thy posterity shall sway'*—

were of a cheerful kind, after a fashion. People who never knew Johnny Mason would inevitably starve in London in days to come. But I suspect that, even as Johnny Mason didn't satisfy his hunger by such a reflection, the apocryphal prophet, who sought to buck up the British queen by his optimistic utterance as to the better luck of her descendants, probably didn't really do her much good.

There was a coffee stall at the end of the bridge, where a couple of railway porters re-

galed themselves on steaming mugs of tea and thick slabs of bread and butter—and, God! how I envied them! There never was a finer smell of food than that wafted out from that simple restaurant. But I passed by, and slowly crossed the bridge. I had to go somewhere, and Surrey seemed as good a county to be in as Middlesex.

Crossing over to the up-river side of the bridge, I looked upon the yellow waters as the tide swirled down, eddying strongly against the piers. Early morning empty barges were navigating down, crab fashion, and a fussy tug forged laboriously up stream with a string of deeply laden coal flats. The skipper of the tug held a mug of something steaming in his right hand, and grasped the spokes of the wheel with his left. Damn him! Everywhere, it seemed, were fellows gorging and swilling. Greedy brutes!

Across the bridge I saw some steps leading on to the terrace that runs along the front of St. Thomas's Hospital, and stumbled wearily down them. I had never walked there before, and it was empty, and—O haven of rest—there were garden seats at intervals. Half-way up the front of the great hospital I sank with a sigh into one of them—and it seemed to me

as if I had never known before what ease and luxury meant.

And there I sat, and heard London turn over in its sleep, yawn, and slowly wake up. It is the strangest, saddest, most fascinating of all hours of London—that cold, clean hour when it slowly gets its legs out of bed, and half reluctantly lights its fire, and sweeps its hearth, and begins its new day.

Opposite, across the placid yellow waters, towered the great Palace of Westminster—its perpendicular lines and delicate traceries softened and veiled by the bluish haze that always seems to caress it. The splendid building sent long, quavering reflections across the Thames, almost to my feet. The fresh green of the gardens above the terrace nestled in prettily under its grey bulk. Red-sailed barges, beached on the shingle above the gardens, gave a tinge of warm colour to the cold chastity of the picture.

I sat and gazed drowsily; and, by-and-by, the waters turned to a brilliant dazzling blue, the pale sky became a deep azure, the fabric of the palace quivered and trembled into the grey hull of a man-o'-war, and a little primitive stone fort that raised its round tower out of the sun-shot waters. Across the waters was

a low shore, with white houses gleaming amongst dark-foliaged trees. An empty tramp steamer churned up the fairway, leaving a creaming wake along the blue. Flights of gulls swooped and screamed. A white-sailed boat drifted idly on the breezeless, glassy surface of the harbour—and I was surprised to find myself sitting in the Domain, looking out from Lady Macquarie's Chair across the sunlit waters of Port Jackson, with the Botanic Gardens running round Farm Cove on my left, Sydney humming behind me, and the red roofs of Mossman's Bay directly opposite. And I was just going to get up and stroll round through the Gardens, and below Government House, and by the Circular Quay up into the city, when I heard a rude voice, and beheld a tall, fair-faced policeman standing watching me suspiciously, and saying: 'You can't sleep here, sir. Been making a night of it—eh? Best get along home to breakfast, hadn't you?'

So I stretched my cramped limbs, stood up, bid the constable good morning, and walked off—'home to breakfast.'

'And the evening and the morning were the first day,' my good old Jimmy—the first day for me in Queer Street.

LETTER VI

DEAR JIMMY,

What a day that was! There have been many others since that were as bad in most respects—as famishingly hungry and as gloomily hopeless—but never a one of them ever contained so much of direful unhappiness and wretchedness as that which was my first in Queer Street. It stands out from its fellows in my recollection as the most miserable of all the days of my life. It symbolizes to me the uttermost and darkest depth of hell to which I ever descended. There was in it no relief of humour. No interest of novelty and strangeness redeemed it; and this is itself strange, because I have always been responsive to the charm of learning some new lesson in life, even if the lesson was a bitter hard one to learn, and always deeply interested in the study and observance of unfamiliar ways. I loathe that day; I hate to think of it. Even in the real wretchedness of those through which I pass

now, in the worst moments and the most drearily miserable hours that tax endurance to its very breaking strain, I can look back to those aching twelve with a consolatory resignation to my lot in the thought that none can ever be as dreadfully horrible to me as were they. I know that I have sounded the lowest depths of mental distress, and whatever may come after—starving nights in the snow, bitter shiverings in the east wind, the chill of frosty dawns by the river-side, the squalor and noisomeness of such shelter as may be available to me—I shall never really suffer again as I suffered then. There is a negative element of comfort in this reflection, a faint minus quantity of optimism. It is as if I could derive even hope from the contemplation of that black abyss into which, soul as well as body, I was plunged so deeply in the beginning.

The day began, as I mentioned in my last letter, by my being awakened on the seat by the river in front of St. Thomas's Hospital. I had dreamed dreams, and my body had stiffened in the posture in which I slept, so that when, under the not unfriendly eye of the policeman, I stood up to go 'home to breakfast,' I was cramped in all my limbs, tightly bound in all my joints, and aching dolorously

in my whole body. There was not one little muscle that had the grace to refrain from voicing its complaint, not a sinew that did not grumble. My feet were cold and sore, my legs were painfully heavy, my back felt as though it had been beaten and scourged with rods of iron, my head ached and was dizzy, and I felt that weakness of hunger which is its worst and most distressing symptom. But I pulled myself together somehow and marched off, curiously anxious to sustain the policeman's illusion that I had been making a night of it, and dreading lest he should surmise the truth, and regard me as the homeless man, the vagabond, and the vagrant that I really was.

Of the demoralization of that weakness of hunger no man can have understanding unless he has experienced it. And he cannot have experienced it thoroughly until he has endured it in a great and rich city. The Arctic voyager, freezing and starving on icefields, the explorer famishing in the sun-scorched desert, castaways contemplating cannibalism in an open boat, soldiers dying of hunger in muddy entrenchments—none of these have ever realized the miseries of a starving man in London. They have, at least, the knowledge that there is no food to be had; that there is nothing that they

may seize by force, or stealth, or cunning in the world about them; that they are cut off and far removed from all chance of alleviating their distress. But in a city where the means of prolonging life are displayed on all sides, where the contemplation of well-fed and well-being people is continuous and insistent, where even the cats in the doorways and the dogs at the gutterside seem to be fat and content—it is there that the ghastly realization of the true meaning of hunger is forced upon those who suffer it.

You remember well enough, I expect, old Jimmy, how we were often foodless in Africa—how we pulled our belts tighter, and watched out eagerly for a chance to despoil a farm of its livestock without exciting the attention of the Provost-Marshal? You have not forgotten those long day's rides with Johnny French, when horse and rider went hurriedly and hungrily to battle—and did battle—on empty stomachs? Or the foodless and fireless outposts in the frost, or the unfed bivouacs, or the famished firing-lines in the long wet grass at dawn? All of those were hungry experiences enough, and we used to think that there could be nothing much worse or more trying to physical endurance or nervous susceptibilities.

But there we were *all* hungry. There would be fifteen hundred or two thousand of us—a whole brigade—in the same lamentable case. You did not perceive dimly in the moonlight your distant neighbour regaling himself on bully beef or biscuits. In the bivouac there were seldom to be observed exceptional feasting groups round the little dung fires, while all the rest fasted. Your right or left-hand man in the firing-line did not tantalize you by hasty stuffing between his shots. There was a uniformity of privation that meant a sympathetic fellowship—a common level of hungriness above which you knew that few possessed the means of rising. You were merely one of many. You had three regiments of horse and a couple of batteries of artillery to keep you in countenance. It was not so bad, and you were not so ill-used if, when you starved, all the rest of your world starved with you.

But here it is so different. In the early morning—as on the morning of which I write now—you pace wearily through hurrying crowds of well-fed people, eager and keen for the day's business, fortified by good food against the wear and strain of mind and body that the day's work entails, secure in the knowledge that, when their stomachs clamour

for replenishment, there will be forthcoming the means of replenishing them. They carry in their faces a triumphant gastronomic content which is no less than insulting to your hungriness. Stout bus-drivers, ruddy-faced and jovial, sour you by their mere aspect. Fresh-complexioned typewriter-girls, carrying their luncheons in little baskets, brush by you on the side walks, and know not, nor care, that you covet their cake and sandwiches. People on trams, and in cabs, busy with the morning paper and the process of digestion, seem to flout your whole weary pilgrimage along streets that are deserts for you. Business men, clerks, costermongers, flower-girls, policemen, newspaper-boys, hooligans — the whole varied world of the London streets— seem to be the well-fed rule. You are yourself the miserable exception. All creation has the crumbs of recent breakfast in the corners of its mouth. You alone are hungry, unhappy, weak, and wolfish.

It is this sense of isolation that is most discomforting to you. In your adversity you have no companionship. It does not matter that, in all the millions who hurry and scramble round about you, there must be many hundreds of thousands who are as your-

self. You do not realize them. You only realize one unmistakable and insistent fact—that you are half dead for want of food, and that nearly all the rest of the world is but newly risen from breakfast, and will later lunch, and dine, and sup, while, unless some good miracle may happen, you must starve, and starve, and starve.

I tell you, Jimmy, to adequately realize the true lack of inwardness of starvation you must endure it in London. London hunger is the guaranteed, hall-marked, warranted, genuine article. All others are but comparatively feeble and futile imitations.

At first, aimlessly, I drifted down the road into South London. I was too listlessly unhappy, and too weak, to heed overmuch whither I went. One street was as good, or as bad, as another. One stream of humanity was not less callously indifferent to my needs than any other stream that flowed along any other channel. They were all alike in their cold-blooded, warm-blooded, genial, and sour indifference to me.

But I soon began to realize that Westminster Bridge Road was not a good place for me to be in. It has in its length many cheap eating-houses, which keep their kitchens in

their windows, and fry their sausages and steam their great urns of tea and of coffee *coram publico*, in a fashion that, to circumstances such as mine, seems to be both indecent and dangerous. I looked in the windows of these places, and groaned inwardly. I looked through the open doorways and saw dirty men eating greasy foods in vulgar fashion—and envied and respected them. I whiffed the blended odour of fried eggs, onions, stale bread, cheap coffee and tea, that such premises exhale—and felt sick for them, and lawless, and full of anarchy and socialism, and, like a wild animal, could almost howl in a kind of starving, futile, maddened anguish. So I fled from them, and back across the river into Westminster, and—why, I don't know—found myself in the Abbey.

In the quiet hush of the splendid place I sat before the altar. No one was there but black-gowned vergers—those melancholy ecclesiastical rooks who are a tribe apart from the rest of mankind, and as in keeping with cathedrals as are the effigies on medieval tombs—and they seemed to regard me with an unfriendly air of suspicion. But the unfriendly sausage-shops had hardened me, and when one of them slid between the rows of chairs to

inform me that the chapels would not be open for inspection for another hour, I almost told him to 'Go to hell!'—but did not do so, and pretended to pray instead, resting my head on my folded arms over the back of the seat in front of me—though my heart was blasphemously full of cursings rather than resignedly overflowing with devout meditation and supplication. And there, worn out with weakness and weariness, I must have slumbered deeply for a time, for the next thing I realized was the muffled sound of Big Ben booming out ten o'clock from Westminster Palace outside.

When I awoke, and raised my head, people were beginning to move about looking at the monuments, and poring over red guide-books, and shuffling over the pavements—and I was hungry, and hated them all, living and dead, who moved or lay about me, and I got up and went out into the bright sunshine, and the noise and rattle of the busy streets—more miserable than ever, and more weary and unhappy than I had been in all my life before.

A dreary trek by the Horse Guards—where the shiny Lifeguardsmen also seemed to flaunt their well-being in my face—into the Mall, and past Buckingham Palace up to Apsley House

brought me to Hyde Park, and I went in and sat on a seat for a little while, and looked at the riders in the Row. And the look of them, and their shiny horses and smart grooms, and the happy little girls and boys who rode ponies up and down the tan, made me madder than ever, so I crawled up to the wide open space in the middle of the Park, and threw myself down on my face in the grass, and almost at once dropped off to sleep.

It must have been a sound, deep, dreamless slumber, and have lasted many hours, for when I awakened the sun was well down in the west, and it was late afternoon. In a dim way, at first, I failed to realize where I was, and my situation. I had a vague notion that it must be time to get up, that I had overslept myself, and that it must be past breakfast time.

And then I opened my eyes to the blue sky that was flecked with drifting summer clouds, and caught the whiff of the grass, and heard the shouts and laughter of children playing about me—and remembered with a sudden shock who I was, and where I was, and how I was. That I was John Mason—a dead-beat, homeless John Mason, starving, thirsty, aching and stiff—was in itself a sufficient realization of unhappiness. That I lay in the Park because

I had nowhere else in all the world to lie was a confirmation of it. That I was intolerably hungry, after a fast of nearly thirty hours, was a convincing and uncompromising fact.

When it all came to me, Jimmy, I rolled over on my face again, and buried my head in my folded arms, and cried like a child. I was weak, and I was 'done'—so forgive this confession of utter weakness. Nobody saw it.

My thirst took me to a fountain in the Park, not far from the end of the Serpentine. I had never drunk at a public fountain before, and there were crowds of people passing up and down, and the problem of how to do so gracefully seemed enormously important. I stood for a long time to see if anyone else drank, and I saw a foully dirty man in a tattered and faded overcoat shuffle up and drink out of one of the little chained tin cups, and presently a group of children came and washed their hands impartially in the basins where the cups reposed. Then came a red marine, and he quenched his thirst from the vessel the dirty man had used, so I followed him up and took the cup from his hands, and drank from it three or four full measures. I think it did me some sort of good.

I went away and lay upon the grass again, and tried to think. Clearly, if I did not eat soon I would collapse. But how to eat? I was an ass, but I could not browse on grass. My long sleep and the water had refreshed me a little, so that I had come out of the mad, chaotic mood that had beset me in the Abbey, when I had no process of thought but to curse all Americans, and especially Americans with Baedekers, and of Rotten Row, when all equestrians had seemed to be utterly damnable.

Feeling all over my clothing to see if, by any chance, I had harboured anywhere an unsuspected coin, I came across something hard in my right-hand waistcoat pocket, and drew out a gold pencil-case.

From its associations, it was to me a very valued relic, but months ago I thought it had been lost or stolen, and its discovery was infinitely surprising to me. I looked at it vaguely for a long time, thinking about it, and whose it had been—and it brought up years of my life, and scenes and incidents that were half forgotten. It had been to me, always, a kind of charm. I had carried it in South Africa, and had somehow regarded it as a talisman that ensured me against death in

action, or wounding, or sickness. You know about it, Jimmy, and whom it belonged to originally.

And now came the bitterest part of that day of bitterness. For an hour I sat on the grass and thought, thought, thought. Always I could see a sweet, gentle, tender face—a woman's face—that seemed to look pitifully and sorrowfully at me over a gulf of years, and through a misty landscape of half-remembered things that sometimes glowed vividly in a sunlight of happiness, and sometimes was hidden with sad uncertainty, and doubt, and the nebulous driftings of dark shadows. Always the sad, gentle face seemed to look at me across all the landmarks of my life. There was never reproach in it—it was too sweet for that—but ever the look of tender pity, and the quiet gaze of a great love, and a boundless charity and wisdom.

It was a face that could never frown, a clear-eyed, trusting face. The pure, brave soul shone through it, and made those who had ever seen it think, if they doubted, that there must be something of a heaven for such a soul to have come from and gone back to. Nearly thirty years is a long time for a man of my age to look back across to the memory of

a face, but so far back as that I always saw well and clearly when I looked at the pencil. It was ever to me a kind of magician's wand to conjure up my childhood with, and the remembrance of that dear, dead, long-hidden face. Whenever I had done good, honest, well-intentioned things—and I did sometimes, Jimmy—I always had it with me. Whenever —and I did them often—I set out to perpetrate evil things, I left it at home. It was very dear to me, that gold pencil.

Here, in my starving misery and weakness, I thought of pawning it. There would, I estimated, be a possible five shillings in it. If I did not get some money, the only other alternative was suicide. I could not endure another day and night like the last night and day. I saw myself becoming as the foul man who had drunk at the fountain, or as those with whom I had spent the night below Hungerford Bridge. Already I felt that I was tainted by my contact with them, that already I had begun to look like them, and to walk like them, and to think like them. And it was more than I could stand.

So I thought, and thought, and thought—and in the end I determined that I would die. I sentenced myself to death, I planned the

process of self-execution, and I decided upon the time, and the time was to be to-night—late to-night, when London would be asleep. But I would not die in London—I would walk out of it and make an end somewhere in the country.

I lay a long time in the grass thinking of many things—some of which were pleasant and some unpleasant—that had happened in my lifetime. It was a short, useless lifetime, but I took a little consolation in the reflection that I had, at least, done one human being a good turn towards the end of it. The episode of Doris cheered me a little. I had saved a soul from utter damnation. I had something to set against the fact that I had hopelessly damned my own.

After the sun had set I rose up and walked, or shuffled, wearily across the Park towards the Marble Arch. I knew that if I could continue the shuffle sufficiently far along the Edgware Road I would come eventually to the outskirts of London and into open fields, and perhaps I would find a convenient railway-line to lie down upon, or a pond to drown myself in, or some other means of solving easily and expeditiously the problem of existence—or, rather, of bilking the problem.

I crossed Oxford Street. The Edgware Road rattled and roared with outgoing omnibuses, shrieked with the din of evening street noises, and surged with the hurrying, outgoing crowd of home-bound people. They were hastening to houses and to dinners, and to such happiness as they were capable of. I was going to my death, and there wasn't one of them that would stop and subscribe half-a-crown to keep me from it. There were many elsewhere who would be glad to hear of it, a very few who would be sorry, none to whom it would make any real difference. I felt a sort of grim satisfaction in the thought that perhaps some creditors would care a little, and a considerable amount in the reflection that they would, with my death, have to submit themselves to a realization of their losses without any faint hope of ever making them good.

Suddenly, as I limped through the crowd, I smelled a smell. It was a rich, greasy smell, and involuntarily I halted, and found myself gazing into a shop window similar to those I had looked longingly into in the Westminster Bridge Road in the morning. Flat pans of fat sausages sizzled over little blue gas jets. Other pans were full of frying onions. Others

had slab-like pieces of beef spitting and sputtering in a sea of hot grease. Loaves of bread and plates of tomatoes flanked them. There was a ham and a round of beef with parsley on it. There was a fat man turning over the sausages and steaks with a fork, and fishing out portions of them on to plates, and the rattle of cups and saucers came from within. I stopped and gazed greedily, and Life was too strong for me.

The next shop had three golden balls hanging over it. I went in, and in a little time I came out with six shillings and fivepence-ha'penny, and the moment after that I was in the sausage-shop.

All of life, my Jimmy, is made up of the sublime and the ridiculous, but there is no place like Queer Street for the blending of the two. There, it is nearly always impossible to tell the one from the other. Here had I stepped from the vagueness of the Beyond into the light and warmth of the sausage-shop. It was suicide or sausage, and sausage had it. It was a sentiment or sausage, and sausage still had it. It was my life against the smell of sausages, and the smell of sausages saved my life. But I really felt meaner over that turning aside than I had felt over any of the

mean things that had brought me to Queer Street. The saving of life was a sublime thing —even such a useless and squandered life as my own—but it was eminently ridiculous that it should be saved by a sausage!

LETTER VII

DEAR JIMMY,

Where I write from to-night is that elegant little caravanserai in the Blackfriars Road which I have once or twice before mentioned incidentally as having been the dating place of others of these epistolary efforts. In these days a night's rest within its hospitable walls represents to me the height of luxury and the acme of comfort. But it is seldom that I can afford such comfort and luxury, for indeed the price of a bed—and, mind you, that means a separate room as well—is almost prohibitive. It runs to a shilling, and a shilling, my James, is a shilling. It is only quite lately that I have verified that fact for myself, but I can assure you that it *is* a fact, and a very insistent one, too. There are in a shilling twelve pennies, and twelve pennies represent the average price of four days' rations. So you will see that it is only on very rare and affluent occasions that I can rest my weary bones here.

But to-night I am very rich, for I have two-and-ninepence, and very tired, for I walked about all last night. Two hours ago, however, having three-and-sixpence altogether—a very princely sum—I dined luxuriously in a magnificent sausage and onion shop in Aldgate, near the Minories. There I had one very large and doubtful sausage (I swallowed my doubts with the sausage), a great heap of fried onions, a fine hunk of stale bread, and a large pot of stout, for sevenpence. Subsequently I invested twopence in shag (shag is an excellent brand of tobacco—when you have not smoked for two days), and now, feeling full-fed, and blowing very rank and poisonous clouds of smoke about the public room of the 'hotel,' I am about to try and describe the delightful and opulently luxurious place to you.

If you cross Blackfriars Bridge from the City side, and come southward for half a mile or so—past the rail-head of the Clapham, Tooting, Balham, and other South London electric trams, and under the railway-bridge that crosses the road—you will find, on the right-hand side, a row of rather dingy and unkempt houses, which are distinguished from other houses higher up and lower down by the fact that they nearly all sport large four-sided

gas-lamps over their front doors. You will see on most of the lamps such inscriptions as: 'Good Beds for Single Gentlemen'; 'Beds—Men Only—1s., 9d., 6d.'; 'Beds—Women Only'; or 'Beds, 4d.' To almost every front door leads a short flight of steps, more or less clean, and most of the doors are open until two or three o'clock in the morning. They all seem to be grouped together in one stretch, rather less than two hundred yards long.

It was a puzzle to me at first why they were all together, and all here, but I fancy the solution of the mystery must lie in the fact that the buildings are owned by a landlord who specializes in lodging-houses of this kind. Of course, there are heaps of others all over London, but I think that, from the proprietary point of view, Blackfriars Road must be regarded as a good 'pitch.' It is central to the City, to the East and to the West, and particularly central to the printing quarter of London—Whitefriars, Fleet Street, and the district along Fetter Lane and Shoe Lane. Not a few gentlemen of the Fourth Estate make wearily hitherward as the papers go to press, and the last lingering hope of a 'par' or a 'story' finding acceptance is ended by the closing of the sub-editorial rooms, and drowned

in the boom and crash of the machines. Sad dogs these—interestingly and mendaciously reminiscent, always impecunious, and frequently drunk. Then, again, it is handy to theatre-land, which may roughly be located along the Strand. So they get the minor actors also—elegant fellows whose parts are usually to carry a flag, open a door, or say, 'My lady, the carriage waits,' while in the theatre, but who, when out of it, prove, to their own satisfaction, that they are really better actors than Irving ever was, or Tree is, or George Alexander, or Lewis Waller can ever hope to be. They always address each other as 'Dear boy,' and outsiders as 'My dear sir,' or 'My good sir.' Also, they have much to say of 'The Profession'—generally of an adverse description. And hither come, also, a very large proportion of those of the leisured classes, whose days are spent in the parks, and earlier evenings in the glare of the lighted streets.

Yes, I fancy that if I were to become a small capitalist, and were contemplating the keeping of a lodging-house, I should strenuously endeavour to establish myself in the lower end of the Blackfriars Road.

I think I have slept, at least once, in each description, or grade, of these establishments.

The fourpenny beds you want to sleep on top of. They don't, of course, go in for such luxuries as sheets, but are covered with elderly samples of those brown army blankets which we knew so well in South Africa. The beds are arranged in dormitories of six or eight, and 'yer pays yer money, and yer tikes yer choice' —or what you can get. The rooms are very close, and very full of a certain peculiar greasy smell.

I only slept in this grade once, for a thing happened then that somehow prejudiced me against it ever afterwards. There were six sleepers in the room, and I was wakeful, and, as the grey light came stealing in through the dirty window at the back, I turned over and looked at the man in the bed next to mine. Something in his attitude struck me, and I peered closer into his face, and his eyes were wide open, and so was his mouth, and his lips were blue, and I saw that he was dead. I got up and put my boots on, and stole away quietly. I think the man had died naturally—but I had no taste for being at his inquest, and it was not my business, so I left my fellow guests to concern themselves with the manner of his death, and the giving of the evidence. I have often wondered whether I was suspected of it. But,

anyway, the incident prejudiced me, foolishly, perhaps, against 'Beds, 4d.'

The only difference discernible in the sixpenny class was that there were fewer beds in the room, and of course the extra twopence stood for a slightly higher social grade. In 'ninepence' there were only two beds, and they had sheets, but the sheets, in a way, accentuated their lack of loveliness. There are, of course, dirt and other things in brown blankets, but you don't see it, and even if ignorance is not bliss in this state of life, it is something to be able to shut your eyes to too obvious things. Sheets, however, shout their dishonour and distress, and so, even in these more luxurious ninepenny rooms, you prefer to sleep on top of the bed rather than in it. Though, to do the beds justice, I never saw anyone beside myself so fastidiously inclined. One's stable companion was usually very tightly tucked away in the grimy, unbleached, and unwashed calico, and seemed to consider himself fortunate, and very well situated. For my part, however, unless it were wet or cold outside, I think I preferred a night on foot to either '4d., 6d., or 9d.'—though I often used the two latter classes of accommodation, and thought myself lucky to have them to use.

As I have stated, however, this place is the best of them all. It only has one class, and that the shilling one. It is wholly a cash business, and you must be very sure that you have the full amount. I once met with a curt refusal of my patronage because I only had elevenpence. But it has, in the front of the house, a sort of bar-smoking-dining-room, with tables, benches, and little compartments. Up to the small hours, coffee, tea, and foodstuffs of cheap sorts are dispensed—also on a strictly cash basis. You may sit and smoke until 2 a.m. if you choose to do so, and it is understood that you may occupy your bed until between ten and eleven o'clock in the morning.

The house, evidently a very old one, is divided into some fifty little cubicles, each having a bed with (fairly) clean sheets, a washstand, a jug of water, a chair, and a strip of carpet four feet in length. The bed is slightly over two feet wide, by a little more than six long. It has two blankets, a pillow, and a counterpane, in addition to the sheets, and every article is most emphatically branded, 'Stolen from the Republican Hotel, 2001, Blackfriars Road.' On the washstand, which is a wooden shelf across one corner of the room, beside the basin,

there is a small enamelled tin soap-dish, and this is carefully screwed down to the boards, as the mirror is fastened to the wall. From these precautions one assumes that occasional guests are regarded as likely, being moved by pleasant memories of the place, to take away souvenirs of their sojourn. Curio hunters, probably, or collectors of relics—but the proprietary very effectually removes temptation from the paths of these interesting people.

As I write now, in the public-room or coffee-bar, there are not more than half a dozen people in it, not counting the manager, a stalwart in shirt-sleeves, with brawny arms, and a flat face, which generally wears a genial expression, but which can look very fierce and ugly if its owner is obliged to assert himself in his managerial capacity. I saw him fire a drunken man out one night, and he did it well and effectively. More customers will come in after midnight, and about 1 a.m. the gay scene will be at its height, and the brilliancy of the conversation at its zenith. Then they will begin to drift off to their various apartments, and there will remain only a residuum of night-birds who have no purpose of rising early on the morrow, but a very earnest one in awaiting the always-to-be-expected generous individual who may

invite them, either collectively or individually, to partake of refreshment.

Sitting opposite to me, and industriously poring over the greasy remains of a morning paper is an old man who has always interested me immensely, though I have never spoken to him. He does not seem to be ever inclined for conversation. I imagine that he lives here, for on each of my visits I have always found him sitting at one of the little tables, no matter how early in the evening I may have come in. He never goes to bed until the stroke of two, and all the time keeps quietly to himself. I have never seen him speak to anyone, save to reply in the most briefly uttered monosyllable to any remark that may be addressed to him. His clothes are always neat and tidy, though old and slightly shabby. His linen is always clean, though the cuffs and collars are ancient and frayed. But his head and his features are his most striking and interesting attributes. He has a beautiful head, a finely-shaped cranium. The silver hair is always closely cropped, and carefully parted in the middle so far as it comes towards the high, broad forehead. A thin, aquiline nose, brightly dark eyes, a white moustache, and a well-moulded firm chin give him an air of distinction and good breeding.

His hands are small and well shaped, and the finger-nails always clean and carefully trimmed. He is very thin, and his cheeks rather hollow. Sometimes he seems to me to be a little starved. To-night I would like to share with him some of my two-and-ninepence, but dare not ask him to have a cup of coffee. I am sure he would refuse it, in a coldly dignified fashion that would curl me up and make me wish I had not spoken. Sometimes he writes busily in a frayed and worn pocket-book. Sometimes he sits, with his chin in his hand, gazing abstractedly through the open window into the dark and shabby roadway. Very rarely he smokes a cigarette.

One night, after a long and rather entertaining conversation across the counter, I ventured to ask the presiding deity whom the old man might be, or rather, what had he been—they are mostly 'has-beens' at the Republican. Instantly he put on his most severe and ferocious expression.

'Look 'ere,' he said, 'you mind your own dam' business. No one wants to know who you are—do they, hey?'

So I made haste to change the subject, and to buy a cold hard-boiled egg as a more effective means of doing so. This retort impressed

me. But it also redoubled my interest in the old man. He was always treated with respect by the manager, and I have even heard him called 'sir' and 'mister' by the other customers. One of them, whom I afterwards made the same inquiry of, said:

"'Ow—'ow shed I know? There ain't a bloke 'ere knows. Wot yer wanter know fer? Bet th' old bloke's bin somethink, any 'ow. Arst 'im y'self."

There was a story in that old man's face, and a sad story, too, I should think, and one that wasn't his fault. Every bit of him shouted that it belonged to a gentleman. Some morning I shall walk out after him and see where he goes—for he always leaves about eleven in the morning, and marches away, erect and soldierly, in the direction of the bridge. Yes, one of these days I shall go after the old man, and solve the mystery—but only for myself. One would hate to give him away to any of these fellows who come here. I wish I could know him. I like that old man.

Of the rest of the company, which, as I write, is gradually augmenting itself, none of its members have struck me as has the old man. They are of many sorts, and endlessly varied, but all possess one unfailing characteristic.

They are all poor. The honestest and best type, so far as I can make out, is that of the working artisan, or mechanic, who goes to bed early, and leaves instructions to be called at 5 a.m. He is just what he is, and is not ashamed of it. Most of the rest of us are ashamed of what we are, and try to make out that we are what we are not. He is a plain, grimy, honest man, working honestly for an honest wage—we are, for the most part, the dishonoured and the dishonest culls of society. I don't apologize for myself, or for my dear comrades, Jimmy. Apology would be as useless as the subjects of it.

As the night wears on, the room becomes dense with smoke. There is a clatter of crockery, as the more fortunate partake of a belated supper. A couple of very opulent people are eating ham and eggs. Two rather inebriated guests, who seemed inclined to quarrel, have just been requested by the manager to 'shut their 'eads.' I wish Hogarth could come to life, and spend an evening at the Republican; or I wish John Leech could see it. Both would find that London has little altered since their day—at least, this aspect of it.

Snatches of conversation, loud talk and low

talk, bursts of laughter, improbable tales, the din of twenty garrulous tongues in a room fifteen feet square, float all about one. Some stand up by the coffee bar, and argue on all manner of subjects whose chief scope for argument is that they afford it as well as anything else. Others sit on the benches, and lie and boast about themselves. One man draws a diagram on a table with a piece of chalk, and seems very earnest in explaining something to two, who contradict him. The single bright gas jet hanging in the middle makes a sort of halo in the drifting, eddying smoke. I can hardly see across the room—it is so thick now. My old man still sits silently opposite to me, reading in the earlier pages of the shabby notebook, utterly indifferent to, and careless of, the racket that goes on about him.

The talk is something like this: 'So, dear boy, I retorted, "What! Take a part like that. No, sir! Not if I were starving. I *will* not degrade my art." And would you believe, dear boy, the damned fellow laughed in my face when I said I had left my cheque book at home, and asked him to lend me a dollar.' . . . 'What I sez is this. 'Ere I've got twelve years' service, two medals, *an'* five bars—*five* bars, mind yer, Bill—an' 'ere, I gits pinched

fur a month, an' loses me bloomin' pension. Any bloke might git a month.' . . . 'Ahve coom fra' Coomberlan', an' ahm gaing yam tet coontry.' 'There's nobbut.' . . . 'Aint y' got th' proice of a cup er corfee, 'Enery? S'elp me, I'm storvin'.' . . . 'Yes, I saw a cab run over an old man in Portland Road—got his name—went to the Middlesex Hospital—found out how he was—came straight down to the *Looking Glass* office—and, dash me, if that infernal Press Association hadn't just fired in a flimsy saying that he was an American pork-packer. Disgusting, isn't it? I'll chuck journalism, and take to boot-blacking.' . . . 'Oi tell yez, Oireland's goin' t' have Home Rule, an' be damned to yez!' . . . 'No—I haven't had a day's work, except addressing envelopes, for four months. Doesn't seem to be much advantage in being a Cambridge man, with a fairly good degree, does there?' . . . 'We seen th' bleedin' copper comin', so, of course, we knows.' . . . And so on, and so on.

I have just stopped writing, and have had some coffee, and now it is a quarter to two, and I'll go up to bed. I have No. 17 to-night—a quiet room at the back, with a fine outlook over roofs, small yards, and slums—and

in the morning I'll be able to sleep late, because I shan't hear the noises of Blackfriars Road. If ever you put up here, Jimmy, always go for a room at the back. You get twice your bob's worth. I'm stiff, and sore, and aching to-night, and that little bed upstairs is a prospect of Paradise. Good night, old boy.

LETTER VIII

DEAR JIMMY,

It is more than a week ago since I wrote my last letter to you, and, on the whole, it has not been such a bad week for me as some of its predecessors. For I raised the sum of thirty shillings—I will not bore you by detailing how, and will only state that it was obtained comparatively honestly—so that I have been fairly well fed, and fairly well housed for eight or nine days.

With an amount of forethought which I do not pretend to account for, I refrained from taking a room for one night at a leading hotel, and dining and breakfasting luxuriously, and booking a stall at the Empire—none of which deeds would have surprised me had I found myself doing them—and stayed on here. Also, I bought myself a new flannel shirt, three collars, and two handkerchiefs, besides bathing myself at the cost of sixpence a time, on several occasions, in some public baths in the

Borough of Holborn. And now, as I write again in my Blackfriars Road 'Hotel,' there still remains the sum of two-and-sixpence wherewith to face the world, as I have no doubt I shall have to face it again in a day or so. But I am fortified for a while against the scone and cocoa diet which must inevitably recur.

All the week I have been cruising round London in a desultory way trying to find out if there was anything I could do for hire, and anybody who wanted me to do it. In the former quest I was eminently successful, in the latter just as eminently unsuccessful. Of course, the kind of job in which I flatter myself I should have cut a fairly decent figure at one time was closed to me now. When you have been kicked out of a club, I doubt very much if there is any club in the world which would make you its secretary. Nor do I think that any literary or commercial gentleman, of any integrity himself, would be inclined to employ the services, brilliant though they might promise to be, of any applicant to whom the production of other than forged credentials would be an impossibility. I thought that perhaps I would make a good purser on a mail-boat, and, accordingly visited Leadenhall Street, but I was not long in discovering that

stokers were in more demand than pursers, and that, personally, I was considered to be something of an eccentric. Quite a young man was good enough to recommend me to apply to the London County Council for a pursership on one of their River fleet, as he did not know of any other line where my services in such a capacity would be likely to be required at the present juncture. All I could do was to recommend the young man to go to a very distant and reputedly tropical place, and so we parted.

It was clear that I would have to seek some less ambitious channels along which to steer myself back to prosperity. So I tried many. I was not required as a cab-driver, a 'bus conductor, a policeman, a hall-porter at a shop, a clerk, a warehouseman, a dock-labourer, or even as a ship's cook. I proved to myself quite conclusively that there was nothing I could do for hire, and just as conclusively that there was no one who felt particularly impelled to hire me to do it. So I went out and spent a day in Richmond Park, and, incidentally, learned from a candid Park Ranger, or whatever they call them, that I had about as good a chance of joining that service as I had of becoming an eventual angel.

It came to me as rather a shock that I, Johnny Mason, who had been, seen, and done more different things than eight-tenths of the male population of London, was about as little required in London as any other of the derelicts with which London abounds. Also impressed itself upon me the fact that, once London has a man down, it has very little intention of allowing him to regain his feet. For a day and a half I was, I admit, miserable. Then a sulky, 'you-be-damned' feeling took possession of me. And finally I became reconciled to the inevitable, a trifle apathetic—and then, quite callously cheerful.

The psychological landmarks along this part of one's progress through Queer Street are deeply interesting. As I have enumerated them above, they are misery, sulky defiance, fatalism, carelessness, and resigned cheerfulness. As you pass the first you are in hell—in a five thousand horse-power, forced-draught, uncompromising hell. I do not know whether there is a heaven, Jimmy, but I haven't the slightest doubt as to the existence of the other place.

I forget who wrote about 'the crown of a sorrow's sorrow' (meaning the father-and-the-mother of all misery) being the remembrance

of happier things, and I don't know whether I altogether agree with the sentiment—for I think I would only give it 'honourable mention' were I awarding prizes to the unhappinesses. To my notion, the 'what-might-have-been' idea annexes the pot. At any rate, it was the one that 'got me on the raw,' and made me squirm, and wince, and bite on my lip to keep from crying out.

In everything about you—sky, sunshine, flowers, laughing children, peeps through the lighted windows of houses at night, the music of street bands, the play of shadows on still water, the rain, the night—in every blessed thing—that sad idea has embodiment and being. The blue vault above, that so delighted you in the days of your freedom, doesn't seem as blue and as delightful as it 'might have been,' nor the sunshine so life-giving, nor the flowers so bright and sweet-scented. You are cut off from little children—and 'there might have been' some of your own. A happy home 'might have been' a reality for you, instead of a mere glimpse from outer darkness. All aspects, all outlooks, are changed, and you know it and realize it with such a fearful realness that sometimes it almost seems to catch your breath. You see so clearly and unmis-

takeably the wrong turnings you have taken, remember so well the places where, even with a sign-post to point out the obvious direction, you went astray, that it feels as if you had been blind in all the time before. It is made plain to you, in a dazzling fashion, just how much of, and how great, a fool you have been. It is not that you 'kick against the pricks,' it is that you realize that there need have been no pricks, that hurts. The effect is nothing; it is the cruel insistence of the folly of the cause — the unambiguous, excuse-lacking, microscopic manner in which you are compelled to see and know the folly of it—that lashes your heart till it is raw and bleeding. And the thong of the whip is 'It-might-have-been.'

But there is this about that hell period—there is still hope for you. If you can smart sufficiently under the sting of the lash, there is even a chance that you may walk out of Queer Street. If you can't feel pain very deeply, if the constant succession of cuts deadens and destroys the acuteness of your sensations, and you come into the 'sulky and you-be-damned' lap of the course, and after that into apathy, and, finally, into callous cheerfulness—then, I think, you are about done for, you have become

a resident rather than a lodger in Queer Street. For the rest of your days you will be a familiar figure in Queer Street, and your funeral will start from Queer Street, and even the people of the street, as is their custom, will throw mud at your coffin. It is never to be forgotten that the people themselves are going to be less merciful to your memory than those whom you have left outside in the world. The latter *may* say 'Poor fellow,' the former will inevitably laugh bitterly, 'Damned fool.' And that is natural enough, my Jimmy, for it takes a fool to be a connoisseur in fools.

Well, I'm afraid that, so far as regarding myself goes, I've become resignedly cheerful. It is to be deplored, I know, but still it is the truth. I've come 'into the straight'—in a fashion of my own, to be sure, but nevertheless I'm there, and it would take a miracle to get me out of it, and miracles don't happen. Not that I don't feel things, altogether—I can feel as deeply for others as ever I did, perhaps even more deeply. But I have lost the capacity for feeling sorry for myself. A man ought never to show that he is sorry for himself, but when he loses the capacity for so doing—well, he is done. He is underneath, and he will never 'come up top-side' any more. He is

below the surface, and he must adapt himself to the conditions that exist below it. He is, as the Melanesians say, 'done-finish.' Nevertheless, he may get glimpses of the world above if he can open his eyes below water and stare upwards. He is better off, perhaps, if he can't; but still, drowned as he is, he may see through his dead eyes.

Now all that's very fine, but I set to writing this letter not so much for the purpose of inflicting my own perverted philosophies upon you as for that of telling you about the old man whom I mentioned in my last. You will remember that I said I thought I would walk in his wake one morning and see what he did with himself. I did—this morning. It was an inquisitive thing to do, rather a low thing—something like reading somebody else's letters—and I'm quite certain I ought not to have done it. But I have done so many things that I ought not to have done that it seemed to me one more or less would not matter, and, anyway, the old man would not know about it, and there'd be no harm done. (This sort of argument has always been very convincing to me.) So I sallied forth from our 'Hotel' two minutes after he left it, and walked behind him.

For a little way he kept along towards

Blackfriars Bridge, and then suddenly dived round a corner, and turned down that rather mean street—I forget its name—that runs parallel with the river up to Waterloo Road and beyond—in fact, I rather think, under different names, it stretches clean from Battersea to Southwark. He walked rather slowly, not because he was old and weak, but just as if he were saying to himself, as he glanced from the 'first-fronts' on one side to the 'first-fronts' on the other, 'God bless my soul, these houses of mine are really in very bad condition! I must tell my agent to see to them!'—just as if he owned the whole of the dingy row of buildings upon either hand. Perceptibly his carriage had altered since we came round the corner. He had fetched a pair of gloves out of his tail pocket, and gripped them in his left hand. In his right was the tightly rolled umbrella he always carried. The carefully brushed if rather obsoletely shaped silk hat he wore seemed to have acquired some suggestion of rakishness—just the very slightest suspicion of a tilt to one side—since we had left the Blackfriars Road. He was even a little more erect.

At the corner of Waterloo Road he stopped to speak to a policeman, and the policeman

obviously stood to attention, and I could hardly credit my eyes when I saw him salute the old man, as the latter moved off with a curtly dignified nod of acknowledgment. The bobby just scowled at me, as a cart nearly ran me down, and advised me to keep my eyes open.

So we traversed Waterloo Bridge. Half-way across he stopped to admire the view—pretty much as if its beauty had been revealed to him for the first time—and I was perforce compelled to stop too. It is not a bad view, whichever way you look, but my friend seemed to be patronising it in the most coldly critical manner, just as if it were somehow at fault, and he was in two minds as to whether he would admonish it or not.

Up Wellington Street we went, past the funny little house in which *The Spectator* dwells, and I nearly lost the old boy at the corner, for I wasn't sure which way he had gone. That corner is about the worst crossing in London, not even excepting the Mansion House one, and about as easy a place to lose anyone at as you'll find anywhere. But there was a terrific jam when I came up to it, and as nothing but a dog, and a pretty agile dog at that, could have got through, and the old man

wasn't standing waiting for the crush to slacken off a bit, it was fairly obvious that he could only have turned round the corner and gone westward up the Strand.

So I went that way, and presently nearly ran him down looking into the window of a corner shop where they sell engravings and coloured pictures. Then we went into Trafalgar Square—the old chap looking more and more as if he had recently come into the heritage of all the property about him. He walked into the Square, and I slunk round by the inside lion on the Charing Cross Road side so that I wouldn't be seen, for there wasn't the cover of the crowd, and observed his movements. I felt a bit of a sneak, but I was getting more and more interested, and didn't feel like giving up my project of satisfying my curiosity at this stage. He stopped just under the statue of General Gordon, and gazed up at it, his head thrown back, his shoulders squared, his hands, holding his gloves and umbrella, clasped behind him. And there he stood, rooted, seeming almost to worship.

I don't know whether you'll remember that statue, Jimmy, but you'll know the one in Melbourne—I think it's in Spring Street, pretty close to the Houses of Parliament—

which is a replica of it. Of all those in Trafalgar Square I think it's about the best, though to be sure the equestrian one at the corner opposite St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, whose sculptor didn't consider a girth an indispensable article of saddlery, is a fine model of a horse. But there is a dignity and a sorrow about Gordon's effigy—in the hopeless, sad pose that must have been his as he looked southward from the walls of Khartoum for the help that came too late—that has always made it seem to me to express a bit more than the average London statue expresses. (There is certainly more in its quiet simplicity than there is in the ornate bit of work near the Law Courts which represents the Old Man whose delay was Gordon's fate.) Gordon couldn't have been done more justice to if they'd clad him in the flowing draperies of other rigs he might have been entitled to, instead of the simple undress uniform he is wearing. There is that same indefinable something in this statue that is in the Chelsea statue of Thomas Carlyle—something that suggests, in one 'blow-of-the-eye,' as the French say, the character of the subject.

For quite five minutes my old friend stood gazing up at Gordon, while I lurked below the

lion's paws, and then he turned to go. As he turned, he lifted his hand to his hat and quietly raised it an inch or two. 'Now, what does all that portend?' I wondered vaguely, and just as vaguely felt meaner than ever for spying upon the old fellow. We went into Piccadilly Circus by way of the Haymarket. Here he made for the 'island' in the centre, where the flower-sellers are, and, more to my surprise than ever, bought a carnation from a fat, red-faced old woman, who seemed very pleased to see him, and to whom he said something that I did not hear. And then he crossed to the Criterion corner, after having placed the flower in his buttonhole.

And now came the solution of the mystery —hardly, indeed, that, but still some accounting for the old man who was so much a fish out of water in the Blackfriars Road 'Hotel,' and yet such a brave old fish, too proud to gasp. London has many surprises, and you can always bet on the unexpected turning up, but I think that what I learned just now was one of the oddest revelations that London has ever shaken out of her bag of tricks on my behalf.

He went down Regent Street, and I was close behind. Here he positively swaggered—

and not a common, boastful, vulgar swagger, but one that had a certain gracefulness about it not easy to describe—twirling his moustache, and swinging his old gingham jauntily. He had his gloves on now. A lady in a carriage coming up the hill, and just opposite Elkington's, bowed to him, and you should have seen the way the brave old buck lifted his hat and bowed back to her. At the corner of Pall Mall a police-sergeant saluted him! He whisked his brolly up to the rim of his hat as if it had been a riding-switch. Then he crossed the road, and—to my gaping amazement—walked boldly into the greatest Service Club in England, a place where you fall over old generals and trip over old admirals. And the hall-porter who had been standing on the steps retired hastily before him to hold open the swinging glass doors that he might pass freely in.

Well, Jimmy, that flummoxed me. From 2001, Blackfriars Road, into that Club, was about as big a jump as I could well conceive of. The contrast dazzled me. It was just as if, in more prosperous days, I might have strolled out of my digs and dropped into Buckingham Palace for a morning split. You try and think of a man coming, greasy and

yokey, out of the shearer's hut and strolling into your wife's drawing-room. Think of a seaman coming out of the fo'c'sle of a ship and walking boldly into the captain's cabin, as of right ordained. I tell you, it got me, it fairly got me.

The sergeant was still standing there at the corner, and I went up to him, resolved on a solution of the mystery.

'Can you tell me, sergeant,' I said, 'who that old gentleman is? I saw you salute him. He is exactly like an acquaintance of my own, and I was trying to overtake him when he went in there.' (Observe the ready lie.)

He looked at me suspiciously for a moment; but I had on a clean collar, and my boots were polished, and I looked fairly respectable, I suppose, for he answered readily enough:

'Yessir. That's Sir 'Umphrey Chale—'im that got the V.C. in the Noo Zealand War. 'E's a Lootenant-General—retired—an' 'e's seen about as much fightin' as any of 'em in that there club. Got a regular carpet o' ribbons on 'is chest, I believe. Was a great pal of General Gordon's, they say. 'E comes by 'ere almost every day, reg'lar to the minute. Ain't too well off, now, I'm told. No—I don't know w'ere 'e lives. Somew'ere in St. James's, I

expect, or in Jermyn Street. There's a lot of these old generals an' admirals 'as rooms about these parts, an' spends their days at their clubs. That won't be your friend, will it ?'

As I sit writing here in the 'Hotel,' Sir Humphrey Chale, V.C., is across the room, writing in his shabby old notebook. Think of the pathos of it, Jimmy ! It's not a bit pathetic that a blighter like myself should be here—but that old man ! Poor, half fed, homeless, except for this cheap home, uncomplaining, and sticking desperately to his club—starving himself, probably, that he may remain in it. He has most likely been swindled somehow out of most of his pension—probably by some City sharks—and has just enough over, after his club expenses, and the little he spends on his clothing, to live in a room costing seven shillings a week in the Blackfriars Road. Brave old man ! I was going to say that he's in Queer Street, too, but when I come to think of it he isn't. Members of clubs like that don't live in Queer Street.

LETTER IX

DEAR JIMMY,

To-day is a day of a sort that is so rare in dingy London as to be all the more appreciated and cheered when it does occasionally make its appearance. The sky is blue—deliciously blue and clear-looking—and there is just enough of soft, warm, moving breeze in the air to have cleared the grimy atmosphere, and to enable it to carry some faint though contaminated suggestion of green fields, hedges, rivers, and the open country. You do get such days in London sometimes in the summer. They never seem to be in keeping with the place. It is as if sweet Nature, clad in white garments, had wandered unwittingly into a factory whose processes are grimy and unclean, where dust rises perpetually and deposits itself in thick layers on walls and ledges, and where the din of strenuous exertion, the clang of fervent creation, and the endless rush and scurry of the day's work, fill all the place with never-

ending turmoil. London is most like London in autumn or in winter. She is best suited in her grey dress—with her grey hat on, and the dun veiling of her fogs ready to hide her face at any time. I have often thought that she looks best when her veil has been lowered, and you cannot see her at all—but are only conscious of her ever-restless being, and the pulsing life that throbs in her veins.

I am lying on the grass in Regent's Park—in that narrow, beautiful strip of it that borders the canal, and is always so cool and shady, and freshly green. It is a fairly deserted part, too. Sometimes a nurse, wheeling a perambulator, glides along a path; sometimes a stout old gentleman reads an evening paper on a seat; sometimes such loafers as myself sprawl on the soft turf, and play 'How, when and where'—the London loafer's game with himself that most constantly occupies him, and, of course, has to do with the problem of the commissariat. Now and again come a couple of lovers, and I've seen some one meeting some one else's wife there—or, at least, it looked like that. But the best thing about it is its quietness and comparative desertion, and that is why I like to sit and smoke and think, and, as I do to-day, to write you one of my letters.

Somehow, I have kept going. I hardly know how. There have been long hiatuses in the supply of fuel to my bodily engines, but the fires have been kept alight, and they are all working after a fashion. They would work better with something akin to good Welsh coal, instead of inferior patent fuels, shoved into the furnaces—but it is something, indeed, to have them going at all. One has no cause to grumble—or, at least, comparatively no cause, and one doesn't grumble much. For a chap like me to do so is like a cork tossed upon the waters to complain that it has no idea of its latitude or longitude.

It is true that I am getting outrageously tired of dry scones and cocoa. Twice a day those delectable food-stuffs have served me in the light of a meal. The scone costs a penny, and the cup of cocoa a halfpenny—so you see, Jimmy, that a man can live for 3d. per diem in this poor man's paradise of a London. I do not think there is any other food that is so filling at the price; but I can see clearly that I shall have to curtail my extravagant habit of smoking three pennorth of shag in the twenty-four hours, and add a little to the menu. A sausage is fast becoming a necessity. After the manner of our country, I am ever beset with a

craving for meat foods. Yes, I must save up, and buy a sausage one of these days.

This morning, after I had eaten my sumptuous breakfast as described in detail above, and was making my way slowly up from Blackfriars to here, where I purposed spending the day, I saw the person who was the root-cause of my coming to Queer Street. Now, this, Jimmy, is the one thing I didn't tell you —the identity, or even the sex, or the appearance of that person. It is sufficient to say that, shall we say X, was the person who sent me wrong—and I never realized it until I was wrong.

Now, I feel this way about X. If I saw X about to die in the most horrible way you can imagine, or, rather, that I could imagine (for you never had as much imagination as would go in your pipe, you straight-going old James), and it was within my power to save X, I would stand by and grin. If I saw X getting skinned, or mad in a lunatic asylum, or being buried alive—I would still just grin.

Often and often I have thought that I would go and kill X. Once, I even set forth with the clear intention of rendering humanity that service, with all the plan and detail of how it was to be done plain and clear in my head,

with every resignation to all possible consequences, and with very fair hope that I might even escape the latter. X has possibly never realized X's nearness to death on that occasion. X will only be nearer once again—thirty seconds before X dies. But I didn't, Jimmy, I didn't kill X—and I didn't kill X because I was afraid. I'll tell you why I was afraid, and you will judge how my case argues for or against capital punishment.

Now, I don't believe in murder, Jimmy. It is natural enough, of course, to kill your enemy, to render him incapable of killing you or doing you an injury. Provided that you don't go and stab him in the back, or hit him behind the ear when he isn't looking, or shoot him from cover without giving him at least a sporting chance—in short, if you give him some sort of a run for his money—I don't see that there is any real harm in it. It would often be kinder to kill a man than to ruin him financially—to bring him, say, to Queer Street. I can't think at present of more than one man in the world whose life I would like to take—and I have my doubts even about him, because mere death could not be made as sufficiently annoying as I should like. At any rate, I think murder is an honester crime than seduc-

tion; it is by a great deal more pleasant to contemplate than bogus company promoting, or forgery, or fraudulent insolvency. There is a more primitive healthiness about it than there is about many crimes that carry a lesser penalty. But it has this great disadvantage—it generally entails the unpleasantness of being hanged, and I regard being hanged as one of the most distinctly unpleasant ordeals that it is possible to go through. It must be the very rottenest way of going out.

I suppose you have never seen a man slain according to process of law? I have. I think the spectacle impressed me more than did any other I have ever witnessed. I have seen a man shot—I mean executed—and, although it is not a sight I would stand in a queue to witness again, it was not so very revolting. There was a celerity and briskness about it that carried it off with some amount of cheerfulness. Even the victim did not appear to find the process very trying.

But that scragging business, that ghastly choking to death, combined with cerebral dislocation—it makes me feel a little nausea, even now, when I call the scene to mind.

We stood in a little group at one end of a narrow courtyard. The walls were very high,

so high that they seemed to be the sides of a pit, and they framed a square of blue sky. They were of yellow sand-stone, and the blue was more vivid by the contrast. Across the other end of the oblong pit stretched a railed balcony from wall to wall, some fifteen feet above the pavement. Over the balcony a sloping roof jutted out, and under the roof, and across the platform, stretched a great beam from side to side. We stood in cold shadow, but bright sunlight shone over the high wall behind us, and lit the gallows like lime-light in a theatre. A rope hung down from the beam and coiled on the floor and the morning glow lit it half-way up. Behind was a wide door that opened into the side of a whitewashed corridor.

It was a quarter to nine when we came into the courtyard from a larger one, through a door that opened below the gallows. Passing underneath the platform, I glanced up and saw the square outline of the closed trap-door. With that quick perception which seems to endow us at times of mental stress and nervous tension, I noticed how the flooring-boards of the platform ran from side to side, and those of the trap-door from front to rear, and some arrangements of bolts and catches, and a long rod that ran to a slot in the flooring at the left-

hand side, where the end of a lever came through and joined it. All these details arranged themselves quickly in my mind as we passed silently to the end of the yard, some twenty feet in front of the ugly structure. A solemn warder had come with us, and he indicated with a wave of his hand where we were to stand—and we stood there in hushed expectancy. Two tall warders stood at attention on either side of the platform and waited, too, in solemn silence.

There was no sound at all. A deep hush seemed to have fallen over the whole prison. Sometimes one of the waiting group cleared his throat nervously; occasionally a foot shuffled on the stone flags. The black shadow in which we stood reached almost to the pavement below the balcony, and there was a hard, clear-cut line where it met the brilliant sunlight. Always overhead was the clear blueness. Time seemed to have slowed down. Always I had thoughts of the principal performer in his cell —living the last few minutes of his life—and I wondered if the seconds dragged for him or raced.

A white-faced man in a bowler hat came suddenly to the door and paused for a moment. He seemed to say something, and the warders

stiffened up. He asked a low-toned question of one of them, and the man took a step towards him, and said something behind his hand. The man in the bowler nodded twice, and turned away into the gloom of the corridor. Clear and sharp, and very slowly, a clock struck, in deep-toned trembling chimes, nine times. The process of its striking seemed interminable. Between each reverberating, echoing 'boom' was an age-long pause. Each vibrating wave of sound seemed to spin itself out to the last quiver of its life before its successor crashed out.

We all stood still—rigid, expectant, nervous, pale-faced, anxious—the warder a little way in front of us. He was a fine, tall, square-shouldered man, with a grizzled black and carefully trimmed beard. Still no sound. A minute dragged itself slowly by—another, and another, and another. 'God!' some one whispered huskily behind me, 'why don't they get it over?' The three newspaper reporters, who had been scratching intermittently in notebooks, had put them away. The quietness, the deathliness of it! The prison surgeon, who stood close to the warder, pulled out his watch and looked at it. The click of the snapping case as he put it back sounded

like a rifle-shot. It jarred my nerves, so that I jumped as one jumps beside a gun that is fired—when there is no movement of one's body, but a shivery, pulsing sensation through one's limbs and down one's back, and a rap at the door of one's heart. Would they never come? One began to long impatiently for the death of the man inside. He seemed to be selfishly delaying us—to be keeping us here in this horrid, silent, tomb-like yard. How thoughtless of him!

Suddenly the two warders moved quickly towards either side of the door, and, as they moved, a white surpliced figure came into the threshold, paused a moment, closed an open book, and stepped slowly, with downcast eyes, to the right-hand side of the platform.

There followed—in a swift, cat-like fashion —a short, thick-set man with a brutal face and a strange deformity in it—for the point of the nose was missing, like a skull's nose. He carried something white in his hand, and made a stooping dive at the floor, and seemed to catch up the slack of the rope and clear it aside, so that it slanted from the beam above.

Another age-long pause—and came the man himself, two strong blue-coated men with set faces gripping him by the arms, and guiding

his slow footsteps. Mechanically, the little group steered into the middle of the platform, and halted there—the warders still holding the prisoner firmly. The sunlight shone on them, and I could see glistening beads of perspiration on the faces of the warders.

But the man himself—how awful! His head was thrown back, his grey face seemed to be twisted to one side, and the muscles twitched—so that his half-open lips seemed ever to be about to break into a ghastly grin of amusement. The Adam's apple in his lean throat rose and fell convulsively. His wide, staring eyes wandered in a visionless way from the blue sky down to where we stood. I had a momentary horror that he would catch my eye, and felt extraordinarily relieved when they closed, and his head sank slowly forward. He must have fainted then.

The hideous hangman was doing things in incredible swift dives. He seemed to jump at the man as his head drooped, and in a dexterous fashion shrouded it from view in a white cotton cap that came down over the features. Then he dived at his feet, and seemed to be pulling at straps and fastenings. Then he stooped swiftly aside, and rose up with the noose of the rope in his two hands, slipped it quickly

over the head of the swaying figure, and drew the knot tight. He did it all in quicker time than I can write it—and yet he seemed to be ages and ages about it. Then he jumped aside, the two warders stepped hastily back—still with arms outstretched towards the prisoner. One of the other warders stood with his hand on the lever at the side.

Oh, God—the man was collapsing, he was falling—he would fall across the platform! His knees bent slowly. One gaped in horror at his sinking body—and then, with a sudden rattle of the bolt, the trap fell open and he shot down through the floor. There was a thud, as his descent was stopped by the tightened rope; he swung up to a half horizontal position for a brief moment, straightened out, drew his knees up slowly once, feebly again, seemed to be about to do so a third time—and then hung rigidly, slowly turning round halfway, and then as slowly spinning back again. A little widening splash of blood, vividly crimson, appeared on the white cap over his mouth—and I shut my eyes, Jimmy, and prayed.

No, I don't want to be hanged, old boy. Burn me alive, flay me, impale me—but don't hang me!

I am again in the pleasant position of contemplating a night in the open. Sevenpence is the sum of my wealth. It would procure me a bed of sorts (with bugs in it), and the inestimable benefit of a room full of foul air; but, on the whole, as the night is likely to be fine, and I have been well rested here to-day, I think I will spend the hours of darkness afoot. I do not know what time this park shuts up in the evenings, but fancy that it will not be before nine o'clock. So, at about that hour I will commence a march down to the Edgware Road. There I shall squander 1½d. in the usual cocoa and scone—it may be that I shall make it 2½d., and include a saveloy. It is an extravagant proposition, and requires careful and deliberate consideration, and I do not yet decide definitely as to whether I shall include the German abomination in the estimates or not—I shall see. Then, like a giant refreshed, I shall wander into Hyde Park, and listen to the tail-end of the band performance. I shall remain on a seat in the park until midnight, when it is closed, and, with some amount of luck, may be able to indulge in forty winks. After midnight I shall go to a little cabman's public-house that I wot of off Knightsbridge, and there revive my flagging

soul with two-pennyworth worth of stout. That will, allowing for the horse-meat, reduce my balance to 2½d. I shall walk about for the dark hours—anywhere that it occurs to me to go—and about the breaking of the dawn I will have a ha'penny mug of coffee at a stall, and one slice of bread. That will leave me 1½d., which will, later on, be devoted to breakfast. After that, well—the Lord tempereth the wind to the shorn lamb, considers the sparrows of the air (lucky little devils!), and sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof—and all that.

Here, as I write, the calm, long summer evening is coming on, and the sunlight makes golden slants through the trees, and bands of small boys are beginning to play hidey-whoop in and out amongst their black trunks. People are flocking along from the direction of the Zoo, and from the big open playground in the middle of the park the cries and yells of the cricketers come clearly and sharply, borne on the evening air. It is very peaceful and beautiful. For an hour or so I am not Johnny Mason, the broken-down chump—I am one of the rest of them, one of the decent people who can live their lives openly and decently and happily, and have nothing at all to be sorry

for, and can happily be sorry for themselves—which I cannot afford to be.

This is a loose, rambling sort of scrawl, old boy—but I only write it to fill in the day. It is something like talking to a friend when I write to you, a little like putting my hand on your shoulder and walking up and down, gabbling any nonsense that comes into my head, and knowing that I am beside some one who really cares a bit about me. So you mustn't mind. It sort of fortifies me against the night to come—and I know you are not the sort to grudge helping a lame dog like me. Good evening, old fellow. If I write any more now, I shall become disgustingly maudlin.

LETTER X

DEAR JIMMY,

It is three weeks—perhaps a few days more than the twenty-one—since I wrote to you last. It has not been a fat and prosperous period for me—indeed, it has been so full of emptiness that I have been compelled to devote all the feeble energies in my possession to the mere process of keeping alive, of conserving enough vitality to make the struggle for existence in any way a possibility, even to refrain from relieving myself of its burden by a summary process of *felo-de-se.* There has been none left over for correspondence.

The wolf which is the bad bogey of Queer Street has not been merely content to snarl and sniff at my door—he has actually got inside it, and has chased me round the house with a savage persistency that has not been less terrifying than insulting. The insult lies in the unholy grim humorous appreciation of the joke that bares his gleaming fangs—and

the closer he gets to you the more he seems to grin, and when his grin is at its very worst you know that he is going to bite. If he would only rend and tear your vitals with less amusement, he would not be half the bad beast he is.

I have had many pavement bivouacs, my James, since last I wrote to you, many weary night marches, many days of soul-destroying starvation, many black hours of despair. Sometimes I have been deeply plunged in an abyss of abject, degraded sorrow for myself; at others almost dangerously maniacal with a sort of sullen furiousness against I-don't-know-what —well-fed people, happy people, innocent people, and even against my own unhappy neighbours in the street. At those times I have been, and have frankly acknowledged it to myself, uncompromisingly homicidal. As I have trudged round and about the hard streets, aching and hungry, I have half amused myself —well hardly 'amused,' but diverted myself— by vain imaginings as to how I might run amok through London, and by curious speculations as to how long a run I would have, and how much damage I could do before I was killed or taken.

I have gazed at the Monument, and pictured

myself in the cage at the top with a magazine rifle and fifty cartridges. The clearing of those busy city streets would be a matter of minutes. How the shopmen and bank-clerks, and stock-brokers and costermongers, and cabdrivers and women, and louts and loafers would run for cover! And when the streets and thoroughfares were cleared, so far as they might be within my range, it would be vastly entertaining to lob some long shots westward that would drop, as bolts from the blue, in Fleet Street or Lincoln's Inn. With the sight up to 2,000 yards you could make yourself unpleasant to London over a wide area, and annoy it very much. A bullet would suddenly smite a man dead in Holborn, and no one would know for hours how or why he had been smitten, or by whom. Somebody down in the Commercial Road would stagger, and come down on all-fours on the pavement, and cough up blood, and Jew and Gentile would crowd round, and then panic, and then scurry into their holes like rats. The craft in the river could be livened up, and the bargees hustled, and windows of warehouses over on the Surrey shore punctured, and stray shots sent winging into houses more than two miles away. And then how the well-protected Londoners would

howl for the police, and send those decent fellows clambering up the narrow stairs inside the Monument to take me into custody.

What a startling thing it would be for all London, what a heaven-sent sensation for the evening papers, what a sporting chance for the Lord Mayor! Would he read the Riot Act all on my behalf, and get out soldiers to capture me, or would he lead a forlorn hope of Common Councillors in the storming of my position? Of course they wouldn't take long to get hold of one, if they really meant it; but, upon my soul, I doubt whether many would be found in the city to tackle the hazardous job. They would probably decide to starve the lunatic out. At any rate, I am sure one would last for quite half or three-quarters of an hour. It would be an exciting half-hour in the City of London, a very hell of a time. One could imagine oneself laughing at them, and singing out, 'Dance, you devils! I've been hungry amongst you, and I hate you, and it's my turn now—damn you!'

Or one might climb into the Whispering Gallery in St. Paul's, and loose a magazine full down into the cathedral, and pot across at the little entrance door, if anyone came to the attack. Or stand on one of the bridges, and

clear it. Or take possession of one of the big railway stations. Or go out into a suburb and hold up a County Council tram. There are many, if necessarily short-lived, methods by which one's displeasure with London might be manifest to its people.

But London is safe enough. You couldn't get your rifle and your cartridges, and, if you could, the first thing you'd do would be to try and sell them for the price of a feed, and even if you did not do so, your savage, bloodthirsty imaginings are quite another thing to their practice. Hunger makes you savage enough at times, but it cows you too, more than you would think, my James.

I have often and often wondered why the hungry English bear their hunger so quietly, so submissively, and with such an heroic fortitude. But experience has convinced me that it is neither fortitude nor submission, nor is there anything particularly heroic about such endurance. It is simply fear—the terrible fear possessing starving human beings who are a contemptible minority amongst a well-fed majority—that controls them, and keeps them down, and amenable to law, and slavishly obedient to its administrators. And that fear is not the simple natural manifestation of the

instinct of self-preservation, such as you and I have often experienced, say, under shell fire. It is not the sub-conscious dread controlled by cerebral or vertebral regions—the mere healthy distaste for the unknowability of death, the animal dislike of extinction. It is a dreadful something that comes from a chronically empty stomach, from a semi-permanent feebleness of heart-beat, from a weariness of brain and nerve, and from, above all, an innate consciousness of the sheer despicableness of the state of starvation.

However sullenly angry starvation in the midst of plenty will make a man, however much he may resent his accursed condition, he is, nevertheless, involuntarily conscious of his own inferiority to those about him who are well fed. He may find a thousand excuses for his having come into such a condition; may adduce ten thousand injustices that have been inflicted upon his life, even from before his birth; may persuade himself, and often succeed in persuading others, that he is a very ill-used fellow—but he knows all the time, more or less distinctly, that the reason why he starves is because he is inferior to those who don't. And it is this sense of fear of the efficients—for their qualities of efficiency, rather than for their

numerical strength—that keeps him from active revolt. To put it coarsely, he knows that he 'hasn't the guts' for it—and such a consciousness makes him afraid, cows him, holds him back, and leaves him to 'stew in his own juice.' I think that's about it, Jimmy, and if the stump orators who incite him to the assertion of his 'rights' could but sufficiently recognize that such is the case, they would easily come to comprehend the futility of their efforts. A man may be a man, but a starved man is only a quarter of a man—*and he knows it.*

Another matter, too, has ever filled me with a deep wonderment. The potency of fear may account for the submission of the inefficient to the misery of his lot, but what can explain his personal endurance of its most galling and most utterly hopeless aspects? Why does he continue to endure it, when it is so easy to remove himself quickly from it? The very wearying continuance of his privations, the sense that must be his of their inevitable future continuance, the dullness and despair of all his days—these things alone must make him look longingly towards the gate that always stands open for him.

In Life, as he has come to know it, there are

hunger and cold, dirt, lousiness, the contempt of his fellow-men, the insolence of authority and riches—one long and unvarying succession of hard times, and, always more cruelly insistent than anything else, hopelessness. In Death there may be anything, but he does not know in the faintest degree what it is. Your dead-beat has no belief in a Hell upon credit. He has experienced the ready-cash article, and takes that to be the real inferno. So that any consideration of a future period of punishment is eliminated from his contemplation of what lies beyond the wall. What it may be influences him not an atom. It is easy for him to pass through the gate. A quick spring into the river, when the ebb tide swirls down like a mill-race, and the night is black and rainy; a dash below the wheels of a motor-bus; contact with the 'live' rail of an electric railway—there are a hundred cheap and expeditious, and not very painful, ways of passing into the beyond. He may choose from any of them.

But the strange thing is that he does not often find relief in this way. Suicide amongst the very submerged is much rarer than you would suppose. It is a popular notion that Westminster, Waterloo, and Blackfriars

Bridges are constantly infested by furtive unfortunates of both sexes seeking to circumvent a vigilant police force, in order to pop over into the river. But it is not so, or at least I came to a conclusion that it was not. Of the hundreds of utterly outcast waifs and strays who infest the Thames Embankment at night, I would dare swear that there is not more than one in each hundred who seriously contemplates suicide, who even considers, in the light of a remote possibility, such a means of ending his or her sufferings. You can see it for yourself, note it in the conversation of Queer Street, observe it in the actions and lives of the people of the street—that self-destruction, as a means of getting beyond the sorrow and the wretchedness of it, is very little thought of. There are, old James, a great many people who live in Queer Street, but very few leave it *that* way.

Why they don't, I don't know. I only know my own reason for not doing so, one wet and windy night, and I will tell you of it. But even in my own case, I'm not quite sure whether there was a reason. I rather think it was only a fatuous accident.

It was during this recent period of acute starvation, and, to be explicit, not more than

about ten days ago, when a downpour of rain caught me in Hyde Park, not very far from the Serpentine. The only shelter anywhere available was the archway that passes under the bridge across the lake, and leads from the park into Kensington Gardens. I ran for it, but was drenched before I could get there. It was cold rain, too, and I had not had a single bite to eat since the morning of the day before. I stood in the shelter of the arch, through which the wind roared as through a funnel, and shivered for two bitter hours. The rain continued all that time in a kind of stinging fury, and I crouched and chattered with the cold. By the time the downpour had abated, I had come to a very definite conclusion that life was not worth living, and had resolved that I would not go on living it any longer. I was half dead with weakness, sick with hunger, and colder, I think, than I had ever been in my life before.

The proximity of the Serpentine suggested drowning; but I thought that if I went into those still and tideless waters, I might want to swim out again, be caught by a keeper or a policeman, and haled off to a police-station on a charge of attempted suicide. But the Thames, with its strong tide, would be surer

and more certain. I had been by the river-side about midday, and knew that the ebb must be flowing swiftly by this time.

So off I went, sloshing across the wet grass, down through the Green Park and St. James's, until I came into Westminster. It was a queer thing that, crossing Piccadilly, I should have shouted anathema at a cabman who nearly ran me down, but it did not seem absurd to me at the time.

The traffic roared and hummed by Palace Yard, and the lights in the wet pavements looked warm and cheerful, and a public-house at the corner glowed and shone with bright radiance. The House of Commons was sitting, and crowds of people were hurrying to and fro in the three great arteries that meet there. People in overcoats who carried umbrellas passed me laughing, and talking, and cheerful. Policemen in the roadway regulated the impatient traffic pouring in and out across the bridge, and up Parliament Street, and in from Victoria Street. The aspect of them all made me more bitterly resolved upon the execution of my purpose, and I hurried round the corner by St. Stephen's Club, and down the Embankment.

I did not think very much about anything.

Neither the retrospect of things seen and done, nor memories of people loved and hated, nor regrets, nor remorse, nor sorrow for myself were in my mind. All the sensation I had was one of numb discontent with my condition, a sort of vague exasperation with my present wretchedness, and a cynical carelessness as to the morality or immorality of what I was about to do. I felt that the breaking strain was reached. I was done, beaten, finished.

I passed by Scotland Yard, and began to cross the road. It was inches deep in slush, and I went slowly, picking my steps—though why I should have been so delicately minded *in extremis*, I don't know. When I was halfway across, I saw a woman spring from a shadow, run to the parapet, scramble clumsily up, and disappear over into the river. And here, my James, is a curious thing.

I ran to the parapet too, and as I came up to it noticed a life-buoy, a yard or two away, and got it, and flung myself over into the river with it, and in the darkness I heard a shriek and some splashing, and then another shriek, and weakly tried to swim to it. And then I heard another horrible piercing scream, just as a boat ran into me, and a boat-hook caught

my clothing, and I was lifted into the boat. And then I lost consciousness.

* * * * *

When I came to, I was lying wrapped in blankets before a glowing stove, and there was a pleasant sense of warmth and comfort; and a big man in a Thames police uniform was standing over me with a tin cup in his hand, and a pleasant smile on his face.

'Here,' he said, 'drink this,' and he held the cup to my lips, and I drank deep of hot whisky and water, and closed my eyes and thought.

All the impression I had was that I had tried to commit suicide, and had failed, and had only succeeded in making such a fool of myself as would be well advertised in the papers. It was just my way—I was destined to fail in every detail of life, even in the ending of it, as I had failed in it as a whole. I opened my eyes again.

'Well,' said the big man, 'you're game all right!'

'Game'—I. He was laughing at me. He was rubbing it in. It seemed that no little detail of misery was to be spared me. I did not answer.

'We were coming down the river, and saw

the woman jump in, and you after her with the life-buoy; and we caught you up first, as we came right atop of you—but we lost her. How d'ye feel now?'

'For God's sake give me something to eat!'

'Oh, it's like that, is it? What, are you down to it too?'

I told him simply how it was with me, for I did not care what happened—only I did not tell him that I had come to the river to use it as the woman had used it.

He was a kind, good, decent man, that Thames police sergeant. He would have it that I was some sort of a hero.

'Here,' he said, 'you're all right—you'll do. Why, man, there's plenty well-fed folk wouldn't have done what you done—let alone you being right down to it, and half starved. You'll do.' And he got me bread, and meat, and hot coffee.

He told me I could wait until my clothes were dried. Thank God—they did not dry until nearly eight o'clock. Then he took my name, and I told him the Blackfriars Road address, and, as I stood up to go, the good chap gave me four shillings, and said I could come and pay it back when I was able. He

asked me to say nothing about that, though, and I fancy that he ought really to have detained me. And so I went away and had some breakfast. And that was how I failed to commit suicide. The lucky woman had been more fortunate, in spite of my impudent interference.

Well, I don't know, but I don't think I will try again. Just now I am a little better off, and have slept in a bed for five nights. How strange it was, though! The woman and I were both exceptions to the general rule, but why I should have wished to save her I cannot tell. It was only, I suppose, another instance of the variation of the inexplicable human. Man is a queer animal, my Jimmy—a strange beast.

LETTER XI

DEAR JIMMY,

You would often laugh, even if you were very sorry, if you could see in these days the curious expedients to which I resort in order to forget that I am hungry. They are so many and various—and yet so exactly similar in intention and effect—that I hardly know where to begin in their enumeration. Briefly, they all possess one fundamental principle. They relieve or postpone the pangs of hunger by inducing the mind to disconnect the telephone wires which communicate between it and the gastric regions. They lead you, to put it coarsely, to forget that you have a stomach, and that it is insistently shouting to be filled. It is, I suppose, a kind of 'faith-healing process'; but, like all such, it has its limitations. 'Little Mary' possesses a shrill voice and an assertive manner, and may not be put off or hoodwinked for very long; but it is something if, by any extraneous influence what-

soever, one may stifle her clamour even for a little time.

What to do is to go and look at something that interests you. And there can be no place in the world where you may find so much of interest given away gratuitously as in London. The number of free 'Feasts of Intellect' that you may substitute for luncheon is extraordinarily large and astonishingly varied. Of course, a great deal depends upon your capacity for being interested. On that score I am lucky, because there is hardly anything in the world that does not interest me deeply, and I can lunch as well off the Elgin Marbles as on the sight of a lot of hairy workmen pulling up a section of Oxford Street, or a crowd round a broken-down motor-car.

Take, for instance, the British Museum. It caters for an extraordinary variety of tastes and appetites. Often, feeling pretty sick of everything, and when wholly of opinion that being alive is no use at all, and that being hungry and homeless in London matters a great deal, I go into the Egyptian rooms, and browse on the mummies. This may seem to your material mind rather a coarsely gruesome statement, my James, but it does not mean that I abstract bits of spiced Egyptian from

the cases, with a ghoulish view towards their consumption. It is quite a different matter to that. I go there and prowl round amongst the dead Kings and Queens, priests and priestesses, cats and crocodiles, and say to them and to myself: 'Well, I *am* hungry, and I *am* dirty, and the soles of my boots let in the wet, right enough; but, my ancient corpses, *I'm alive*, and you've been dead thousands of years. And even as you are so shall I be, and my present discomforts will matter as little to me then as any you might have endured in your time do to you now.' And it is wonderful what an amount of satisfaction is derivable from the contemplation of those ancient Have Beens.

There is one old Stone Age Johnny, who has been shifted to Bloomsbury from a shallow grave in the sandstone along the Nile, and lies in a model of it, crouched up amongst his earthen pots and his flint knives—and he has been dead somewhere about 6,000 years. (He is a well-preserved lad for his age, and you can even see some of his original carroty hair sticking to his leather scalp.) It does me all the good in the world to stand and gaze at that prehistoric waif. He has been lying in that same attitude for all those ages—while the

Pharaohs ran their dynasties, while Greece was great, while the Old Testament was getting made, while Rome waxed and waned, while Christianity was born, through all the makings of the modern world, he has slept quietly on his stomach, with his legs drawn up, and his head pillowed on his crooked arm—until he could serve the useful purpose of making Johnny Mason reconciled to the fact, even forgetful of the fact, that he had had no mid-day meal. It is sad to think that he could never have realized his ultimate usefulness when he was a wild man bushranging in the desert. There is a sort of 'Alas, poor Yorick!' about the contemplation of this particular human relic that out-Hamlets Hamlet. It was pathetic enough, and gloomily philosophic enough, no doubt, to contemplate the possibility of Cæsar's clay coming to stuff up a cranny; but just think of this fellow coming to lie in Bloomsbury, after 6,000 odd years, for the purpose of being called 'a duck of a mummy' by American girls with Baedekers, and taking the place of two sandwiches and a glass of ale to such a one as I!

But the Egyptian room is what you might call a kind of Lord Mayor's banquet—it fills you up to repletion, and is heavily indigestible.

And so are the Assyrian rooms, and, in a lesser degree, the Grecian. If you feel that you can subsist upon something lighter, try the pottery galleries, or the print rooms, or the illuminated manuscripts, or the place where they keep medieval clocks and watches. My favourite restaurant, indeed, is the Ethnological Gallery. There you can choose of the places and the people that you know—Australia, the South Sea Islands, Africa. I have often done well on the contemplation of Solomon Island canoes, New Hebridean head-dresses, Santa Cruz bows and arrows. Kaffir gourds, assegais, and knob-kerries have frequently stayed my cravings. And the boomerangs, nulla-nullas, waddies and spears of my own enlightened country have more than once helped me to forget that I was starving.

After a time, you become quite a gourmand. You feel, as you pass between the great columns of the Museum's front, what you will be best able to digest—just as when you go into, say, Gatti's, you make up your mind that an under-done steak, a sole, or perhaps oysters, will best satisfy your appetite. You march in through the glass doors, and go straight to your luncheon-table. People whom you pass on the stairways, or in the galleries, cruising about aimlessly, as

if they did not know what to look at next, have your sympathy. They remind you of greedy little boys in the supper-room at a children's party—intensely appreciative of the whole spread, knowing that they have only room for some portion of it, but woefully uncertain as to where they will begin. They stray amongst sarcophagi, stare sadly at old porcelain, gape at tessellated pavements, lurk discontentedly past Aztec treasures, and come out entirely unsatisfied. It is not, of course, that many of those have come to the Museum to feed. For the lack of that reason for their presence they are to be congratulated—but they mostly go away without having really seen anything at all. It would take years to see and know the contents of the vast treasure-house intimately and affectionately, but one thing you may be sure of. If you wish to see them well, you must go and see them instead of having a meal. When they take the place of meat and drink, they are far more thoroughly assimilated than when they are simply objects of inadequate inspection.

Whenever I went into the Museum about the hour of noon, there was always one corner to which I turned first, and, as I came out, I never failed to go and pause there again in

loving contemplation of the bust which it contains. As you pass into the entrance-hall, turn sharply to the left into a long gallery that contains a row of Roman portrait busts along the right, and, on the left, altars and inscriptions that have been unearthed in England. Just inside the door, and facing up the gallery, you will find the dear woman. It is a little white marble head, and the tip of the nose is broken off, and on the pediment there is a tentative statement to the effect that it is supposed to be a portrait of a lady named Julia, wife of the Emperor Elagabalus. Well, Elagabalus was a lucky man, and the long-forgotten artist who preserved the features of his Empress a cunning and deft chiseller. There is the quietest, demurest, most gently ironical smile lingering about her sweet face—just the kind of smile that some flattering speech might have called into play, or perhaps the cruel little smile that the contemplation of some love-sick admirer, whom she had encouraged to his undoing, might have given birth to. It is suggestive of the eternally inscrutable mask of femininity, of the veil which clever women use to mislead the cleverest of men—a beautiful woman's most powerful weapon and her greatest charm. It seems to

dare you, and to defy you, and to flout you—and yet there is something of gentle kindness in it. One day you think Julia was a dainty little flirt, and on another that she was a brave-souled woman whose clear eyes must have been lights of truth and honour, and all gentle charity and goodness. But before all else, you recognize that she was a clever woman, and a brave woman. I have never come away from the contemplation of her portrait, made so long ago and made so deftly, without a stronger feeling of respect for womankind. I hardly know whether to feel more grateful to Julia for having lived these many centuries ago, or to the sculptor who has made her live to-day in Bloomsbury.

Other restaurants and cafés available for those to whom material and solid food-stuffs are denied exist in great number in London. Picture galleries, natural history museums, collections, are abundantly available. But I can't go into detail about all of them. You are never likely, old Jamesey, to make use of them in the way I have outlined above, so there is hardly a necessity for elaborating their 'points.' A very brief description of how I found them may suffice.

There is the National Gallery. I must con-

fess that much of the fare provided there I have found eminently indigestible. It is true that I could make a very satisfying meal of the works of Sir Joshua Reynolds. Rubens, and Velasquez, and a few others (even including Turner), I have browsed upon very comfortably. Hogarth, Gainsborough, and Romney I have done well on. And there are some others.

But the chefs whose soups and entrées have lacked nourishment are the Old Masters. It has always seemed wonderful to me that Christianity has survived their efforts in depicting Christ and His Mother. I have never been able to make out why the greatest Man of all the world should have been represented by these gentlemen as an unhealthy fat baby, and a more unhealthy thin man. As to the Virgin Mary, she is usually portrayed as one of the most insipid and colourless women it would be possible to imagine. I have been told that the colours are the thing. Nobody can produce them nowadays. Well, if that is so, I am prepared to concede it as a good point.

And to come to the martyrs and the saints—the generally anæmic-looking people who are painted as they undergo various tortures at the hands of those who saw no reason for

changing what religion they may have had, or for adopting one if they had it not—it has always seemed to me that if they looked as the Old Masters have made them look, they richly deserved all they got, and a bit more beside.

Take St. Sebastian up a lopped tree (I forget who perpetrated that), getting shot full of arrows. The sinners who are busy below, taking aim and loading up their crossbows, are mostly quite decent-looking chaps, but the saint himself is a sheer libel on mankind. Such a man could never have had the qualities requisite to the making of a saint. The saints, one imagines, were really rather fine fellows who had, at any rate, the courage of their convictions; but poor Sebastian is made out to be the most awful-looking worm in the world. I don't blame the heathen for lynching him. Just as we say to-day of the typical Bill Sikes, 'his face would hang him,' so, I should think, did the outsiders of Sebastian's day very properly feel that a man who looked like that deserved speedy and painful extinction. And there is one strange point about this particular picture—the martyr has been shot clean through some of his bones with an arrow. I knew a man in South Africa who got drilled through

the collar-bone without its being broken; but there is considerable difference between the penetrative effect of a Mauser bullet fired at close quarters, with a muzzle velocity of I-don't-know-how-many thousand feet per second, and a shaft of wood propelled from a bow. It is true that the natives of Santa Cruz in the South Pacific can fire an arrow half-way through the stem of a cocoanut-tree, but I doubt very much whether their missiles could stick through a man's bones without fracturing them—and St. Sebastian's bones are pretty obviously not fractured. No, Jimmy, I've never been able to get the value of a scone and a cup of cocoa out of the Old Masters.

The Tate Gallery I found pretty satisfying. Barring Burne-Jones, and one or two others, it is possible to lunch on its contents without experiencing subsequent dyspeptic symptoms. G. F. Watts was to my mind a particularly good cook, and so are most of the other modern British painters. I like the Tate. (Once I went to see a collection of Whistler's works in Piccadilly, but that was before there was famine in Egypt, and I wish that in these sad times those same pictures were available to me.) I know I am what has been called a Philistine, my James—and indeed I am one,

morally, socially, and intellectually—but, as I have remarked before, we are as God has made us, and if it's altogether my fault that I can see no particular beauty in such as Sebastian, medieval Madonnas and Christs, and the bloodless, unhealthy women of Burne-Jones and Rossetti—well, perhaps that is one reason why I am in Queer Street.

I like looking at the models of prehistoric beasts in the South Kensington Museum. They appeal to me (selfish egoist) in much the same way as the bitumen-coated early Egyptian in the British Museum appeals. It is cheering to think that such as they, in certain species, probably roamed over London as I roam in these evil days, and that in a geological to-morrow there won't be any London, as was the case then. It reminds me that, after all—with all the terrible immediate burden of his privations and his vicissitudes—Johnny Mason is only a louse and a parasite crawling over the earth's crust for his brief second of eternity, and that all the other happier and more fortunate, even less happy and less fortunate, lice about him are really in the same case. Where were they when the Megatherium was? where will they be on the cold, frozen, lifeless earth when it

is appreciably nearer to the constellation towards which it rushes to-day at the rate of eighteen miles per second? It makes me feel that Johnny Mason does not matter—that nothing matters very much.

Of the National Portrait Gallery (dreary place) I won't say much, except that it is of no use whatever in staving off hungry longings. The Wallace Collection is all right. So is Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields. So are many other places, but, after all, some of the best restaurants are in the open air—the parks, the River, the docks, and even the streets.

The docks have always moved me tremendously. Any wharfside is wonderful enough when you come to think of it, or any beach where boats land, or any little creek in whose mud shallow craft lie at low tide—but the Port of London is unique; and the longshoremen of London River are also unique. Sometimes I travel eastward—across the city, past Whitechapel, down the Commercial Road, through that great refuge of all Europe, and land of many nations, lying between the road and the river—and make my way to the West India Docks. There I loaf round, and talk to other idle men, scan the ships, and fill my

ears with the music of the sea trades—rattling of donkey engines, full-bodied curses of those in authority, the creak of block and tackle, the clatter of cans in ships' galleys. It is all pleasant music to me, and all of interest, and nearly always makes me forget that I am hungry—but it is sad music, too, and each time I go there I come away saying that it shall be the last. For when I am there by the water-side, the fact is brought home to me more vividly and seriously than at any other time that I am 'on the beach.' And it is one thing to be on the beach in the South Seas, and quite another to be on London beach. Why it comes home to me more at the docks that I am 'done finish' is because there the track starts for home. The muddy waters in the basin meet and mingle with the river when the great gates are opened, the river runs to the sea, the sea goes south, 'an' dat's whar I would be'—and never will be again, my Jimmy, never again.

It's a narrow little world, isn't it? One day when I was down there leaning against a post, and watching a big four-masted ship being emptied, a fellow came swinging past whom I had last seen most villainously drunk and delirious at Vila in the New Hebrides—a big

Chilian fellow, who was called out there Lopez, and who had been working with some trader on Malekula when I saw him. He did not know me, and I did not speak to him, but it was funny seeing him walk past in that casual way, just as if he had strolled up from the beach at Vila. He looked pretty prosperous, and, as he made his way aboard a ship with an air of ownership and importance, I rather guessed him to be the mate of her. He looked better than when I had seen him last, being held down by six niggers on the broad of his back, mad with the horrors, and screaming Spanish swear words.

And another day I stood and watched a steamer I had once travelled in being tied up in her berth. On the bridge was the same skipper whom I had known, still smoking the same kind of black cigar that never seemed to leave his lips when I was a passenger five years ago. He was a little stouter, perhaps, and there were some grey streaks in his beard, but he was the same otherwise, and it was all I could do to refrain from hailing him from the dock-side. Of course, he had forgotten me, and I didn't quite feel up to re-introducing myself, though I was fairly clean and neat in my dress. (I never did become actually

very shabby—at least to outward appearances, so long as my boots did not receive attention.) He and I had been rather good pals, and I used to spend hours on the bridge, and smoking with him in his cabin—but I wasn't quite such an outcast then. When you have about threepence in the world, you are not eager to claim old acquaintances.

The walk back westwards in the evening through the deserted city was generally rather a melancholy one. It seemed like having stood on the bank of a river which separated one from one's own well-loved country, and having been compelled to turn away sorrowfully because there was no bridge, or no boat to take one across. My bridges and my boats have long been burned, and though it gives me some amount of morbid satisfaction to prowl round the West India Docks, and watch the ships loading up for 'down under,' I know quite well that none of them will ever load me up. Still, one doesn't pull long faces any more than one can help.

The parks, regarded in the light of imaginary food-supply, may, perhaps, best be described as Sunday dinners. On weekdays they are more useful as resting-places than as anything else, but on Sundays the meetings in them,

and the evening music in summer, take the place of luncheons and of suppers. You can get a variety of courses just inside the Marble Arch, and may enjoy a repast that ranges from Atheism to the Licensing Laws. I have listened in one afternoon to an atheist, a temperance reformer, one who would abolish marriage, a lady desirous of the franchise, an anarchist, the Church Army, and a Japanese Christian. For many months, while I have been in Queer Street, I suppose I have hardly missed a Sunday afternoon there, unless it rained. I would be sorry to see the meetings abolished. Their absence from the park would mean to at least one unimportant individual a greatly enhanced comprehension of the reality of hunger, and the hardship of short commons.

Well, old boy, I must stop. I could better imagine the Archbishop of Canterbury taking to being a Murrumhidgee Whaler than you ever coming to live in Queer Street; but if, in the strange changes and chances of this extremely rum life, you should ever do so, I think you will find the Museum and the Docks about as useful places for forgetting your woes in as any you might come across in London. And, personally, of the two, I pin my faith to the Museum.

LETTER XII

DEAR JIMMY,

I am afraid that latterly—that is to say, during the course of the last two or three letters I have written to you, and as far as I remember them—I have been giving you rather an account of my impressions than of my more material adventures. Well, I don't apologize for it. Every one in Queer Street must inevitably have pretty much the same kind of personal experiences as every one else, but they can hardly have a single impression between them that is common and identical.

What I mean is this—let me illustrate it. If you and I—try and imagine it, old prince of the matter of fact—stood together on London Bridge at sunrise upon a clear summer morning, after we had tramped about all night, and were to have no breakfast (so far as we could prophesy), we should both see the sun coming up out of the haze, and the dull copper gleam on the waters, and the

purple-blue shadows amongst the houses and the shipping. The same scene and the same colours would strike upon our eyes, and we should hear the same sounds, smell the same smells of the muddy river and the ships, and the hay in the barges—but to each of us the view would be most utterly different. It would be to me a picture before which in contemplation I could forget our circumstances and condition. I would carry away a recollection of a scene of sordid beauty. You would remember a tableau of two damned fools on a stone bridge, wondering where and how their appetites were to be satisfied. You won't be offended—but that would be the difference between us—and there would be a difference, but not the same difference—in the different respective impressions of every pair of spectators of that sunrise.

So you are getting in these letters just the impressions of the worthless John Mason in Queer Street. But you can believe that the impressions of every other man or woman in the multitude who populate the street vary from his and each other's—just as their thumb impressions vary. Their lives are much the same. Cold, hunger, homelessness are material experiences that they share—but each who

tells his tale must tell it differently, and after such a fashion as he is shaped to tell it. No one can say: 'This is how it gets us.' He must say: 'This is how it gets *me*.' The impressions are the thing, not the common record.

It is true that I have given you some of the adventures too. I have had to, in order to certify my fitness, or to demonstrate my unfitness, to criticize Queer Street. You have had latitude, and longitude, and landmarks—but if you were reading a book of voyages you would want to know these things before you considered the opinions of the voyager concerning what he saw, wouldn't you? He must tell you where he is before he describes it. And in this particular voyage that I am taking—my last, I think—the dreary detail of the course would have little personal interest for you if the navigator, or rather the derelict castaway, did not inflict his opinions upon you. So that is why, old Jimmy.

And now we come to what I want to be at in this letter—the business of telling you that, though I amas poor as Lazarus, as destitute as a starving black fellow, and often as miserable as the proverbial bandicoot on the burnt ridge, yet have I one thing that I can never

lose, that may never be taken from me by man, and in whose inalienable possession I glory and rejoice, as the only thing I have left to rejoice and glory in. If I would, I could not sell it. Nor can any man sell his—try as he may, and bargain with the devil as he may, or with God. It must remain with him till he dies, and it does—even when he may think it does not.

And this last asset, this inalienable possession, is that strange, indefinable part of him which is his soul, his ego, his individuality, his liberty of thought. It may be of the greatest value, mediocre, or the meanest. It may be a blessing and a consolation, or a curse and a reproach. But he has got to hang on to it. He cannot pawn it; he cannot give it away. Nothing but death can take it. When death takes it no man knows what becomes of it. When what we call insanity besets it—well, it is only changed in some subtle and mysterious fashion. It is death alone that has the power of confiscation.

I am pleased with my possession, Jimmy—though you, or anyone else, might not envy me it. I have one suit of clothes, and its pockets are empty. I am never sure where I am to pass the night, nor do I know for certain

how I will be fed to-morrow. But my soul is my own, and even in my worst, and unhappiest, and most friendless times I have that knowledge, and it cheers me—cheers me more than I know how to write.

It is not that I crack my soul up as one who should say of it—'Look here, this is my soul—a turbine-engined, smooth-running paragon of a soul, warranted to do more good and effective souling than any other in the market—this is the kind of soul to have!' I don't. In many respects I regard it as a hell of a soul. It is unreliable, variable, capricious, more often inclined to evil than good; a little worn now, and the worse for wear. It is a confirmed liar; it delights in subterfuge and deceit; it bullies me, and blackguards me, and gets me into trouble. It is a very rip of a soul. For the few good traits it possesses it has many bad ones. For one comfort it brings me, it is responsible for ten discomforts. It is a poor enough thing—but, my Jimmy, it is 'mine own.' Such as it is, I'm glad it's mine. And I wouldn't resign it or sell it if I could.

Now here is a little story of a soul—not mine, but some one else's—and it isn't a very long little story, so I'll tell it to you.

One morning—and it was a fairly prosperous

morning, for I had had a bed, and a breakfast of sorts—I wandered into Battersea Park, having come across the river from Westminster, and up through Lambeth. It was a fine morning, warm and bright, and the sky was pretty blue for London. I had tobacco, and I had a newspaper, and I sought a seat upon the river-side of the park—one of those long, comfortable garden benches which are the armchairs of the outcast. There were children playing in the open spaces beyond the trees behind me—I could hear their shouts and laughter—the children of the poor, who seem to be the only London children who really do play and enjoy life while they have the capacity for doing so.

The tide flowed up, and laden barges drifted with it, and tugs towed empty strings of coal flats down against it. A white motor-launch flitted past. Little flotillas of sea-gulls floated on the broad waters. Everything was placid and quiet, and Chelsea across the river looked nice and clean, and artistically respectable. For these times, I felt pretty good and content. It was not on every morning of the week that I could sit, fed and satisfied, with the morning paper—and a penny one at that—and smoke and read and rest. There was even prospect

of some meals ahead, and of a bed that night.

So you will see that I was entirely in an amiable frame of mind, and, as is my wont when not hungry, had almost become quite pleasantly unmindful of the very existence of Queer Street. I would read the news in the paper, and then the leading articles, and finally all the advertisements, and I would smoke all the time. And at mid-day I would feed somewhere—modestly, it is true, but, nevertheless, I would feed—and then come back again. And so the day would pass. To-morrow might not pass so well, but then, to-morrow is to-morrow.

I had sat for about an hour, and had almost reached the advertisements, when I became aware that some one else shared my seat, and was in occupation of its other end. I looked up, and saw that it was a tall, thin old woman —a very old woman.

I glanced at her at first without noticing her very much, and then resumed my reading. It was an interesting editorial article upon the subject of some correspondence which had careered through the silly season in the columns of the paper I had bought. That particular paper has a genius for propounding the idiotic

sociological, dietetical, or religious questions that appeal to the (no excuse for saying it to you) idiotic English Middle Classes with so much force, and evoke from them so much 'copy' during a time of year which, in Europe, is singularly unproductive of interesting news. The questions are of such a kind as might be put in the same class as 'Do we cross the street gracefully?'—'Should we eat more grass?'—or 'How did St. Paul dress for Damascus?' And it is most wonderful—nay, most awe-inspiring—to note the enthusiasm and verbosity with which citizens, doctor-men, parsons, and pifflers harangue one another, and the general public, in print upon subjects of such a kind. The leader I was reading was a triumph of leader-writing, and it masterfully demonstrated that, although black was black, it was quite permissible to suppose, with equal reason, that white was white. It was not until I had read right through this positive achievement in prose that I could find leisure to turn and look at my neighbour.

It was not in her carriage that one found indication of her great age. She sat up, straight and rigid, on the seat, and stared out across the Thames as if she could see beyond Chelsea to some far-off place that was

invisible to me. Her gaze was so fixed and steady that I stared too. To me, there was nothing but the green trees along the opposite embankment and the houses. To her, there might have been open plains, with waving grass, and dim blue mountains in the distance. Her face was very beautiful, in that fashion of beauty that often comes to old women who may not even have been pretty in their girlhood. It was in profile to me, and the features were perfect. I once saw an aged ex-empress for a brief moment at a London railway station, and her type was the type of my old lady—a type that seems to embody both infinite goodness and infinite sorrow. One hardly knows how to describe it—but you knew a face, Jimmy, that was very dear to me—a brave, splendid old face, full of love, and kindness, and nobility—and it was something like hers, or, rather, it had that in it that was in hers. And because of her memory, the old lady somehow, unconsciously, became a friend to me. I fell in love with her.

Her clothes were black, but faded—almost into the green of shabbiness—but the way the little bonnet set on her silver hair made you think of an old queen with a crown on her head. I couldn't help it—I spoke to her—

a foolish remark about the fineness of the morning. She turned towards me, and seemed to look through me with that strangely fixed gaze that had pierced Chelsea, and said gently, in a low, soft tone:

'Ah—yes, indeed. I can feel that it is so.'

And it was not until then that my density permitted me to observe that she was blind. Her large eyes were of a faded kind of blue, but they were sightless.

'We blind people,' she continued, 'really get almost as much out of the weather as you who can see. We can *feel* a blue sky.'

She smiled in a way that lit up all her face.

'Oh—I'm sorry,' I said. 'I had not noticed when I spoke. You find your way about wonderfully.'

'Yes—but if I did not, I should be obliged to stay at home always. And besides, twenty years is quite a fair length of time in which to learn to do so. One really ought to learn a few new things in such a long time as that.'

We talked for nearly an hour. She asked me if I had not a newspaper, and if there were any news from India this morning. Some disturbance there interested her, and when I had read all there was about it, she sighed, 'Ah me!'

'I do pray,' she said, 'that '57 may not come again. I was there then. I do pray that that awful time may not repeat itself.'

She laughed gently as I made some exclamation.

'Oh yes—it's quite true. I was in Lucknow. You see, I'm quite an ancient person, am I not?'

She told me that she was eighty-one, and spoke long and cheerily about the Mutiny. Her husband had been a surgeon, and she had shared with him all the terrors of the famous seige. And now, here in Battersea, she lived with her son, who had been crippled in the legs as a child during the bombardment of the Residency. All her people were dead. She had a little pension, and—astounding thing—she gave lessons in French to a small private class! It was holiday time now, so she came each day to the park, by way of taking hers, and sat upon a bench.

She was extraordinarily well informed. Her son read the paper to her in the evenings, and she followed every event of the day with keen interest. Her knowledge of the world, as it wags to-day, was wonderfully lucid and exact. Politics, science, literature—we discussed everything—she knew much more of them than I did. Her memory was a marvel. Dates and

periods were never wrong or confused. Incidents that have long been forgotten history were fresh and clear to her, and she had a way of telling them that made them fresh and clear to me, too—much more so than if I had read them, or even witnessed them, for myself.

At last she rose to go, and, feeling that it was the least I could do, I offered to walk with her to her house. She laughed merrily.

'Oh—it's very good of you. Indeed, it is. I should be delighted to have your escort—but please don't think that I need any guidance. I can find my way quite easily. You know, we people of the dark have a sixth sense—if not a dozen extra ones—given to us as compensation. But if you are doing nothing, I shall be very glad of your company.'

So I walked with her, she directing me as to our course. We went through many streets, and finally came into one of small detached brick cottages, in which she asked me to look out for No. 67. I found it, and she found a latch-key, and in some marvellous manner the keyhole, and entered, and said, 'Please do come in.' So in we went.

On a sofa in the front room lay a man with a grey beard, and he was reading a volume of Guy de Maupassant.

'Hullo, mammie, back again?' he called out cheerily. 'Thought you were never coming. But I see you have an escort to-day. Good morning, sir.'

He stretched out a thin hand to me, and smiled just as his mother had smiled, and then they both talked.

I stayed an hour with them, and never saw such happiness, such fine content, such cheerful acceptance of the decrees of Fate. His was rather a weak face, and it was easy to see that the wonderful old lady was the sustaining influence. In all her blindness, she treated him as if he were the one of the two who needed most consideration, and tenderness, and care. He was still the little boy with the mangled legs in Lucknow. He had never grown a day older—in spite of his taste for French novels. She stood behind him, and stroked his white hair, and told me of all their quiet, poverty-stricken, happy life—until I felt ashamed of my own useless, unhappy one. It was a perfect picture of resignation, and peace, and pluck. And presently I went away—feeling mean and poor—poorer than I have ever been in Queer Street.

I have never seen them since. But the soul of that dear old lady has always remained as

a beautiful memory to me. In all her sorrows —after a long life of poverty and distress, and the endless care of her helpless son—she has preserved her cheerful faith in life, her courage, her belief in the goodness of things as they are ordained. She had no complaint, no lingering doubt that anything was in her life that called for complaint. She had had little but sorrow and trouble all her days, and yet she was neither troubled nor sorrowful. I tell you, Jimmy, she made me blush for myself. It was better worth having as a priceless possession than mine, but her soul was her own too.

I am in a Rowton House to-night. I don't like them much. They are too big, and too full of Queer Street people. Though who am I that I should be fastidious?

LETTER XIII

DEAR JIMMY,

To-day my address is Hyde Park—no less. That is where my home is. It is not a bad address by any means; in fact, it is rather a coveted one, for if you go up the Edgeware Road, quite half a mile up and more, you will find a whole neighbourhood whose inhabitants describe themselves as being of Suchandsuch Street, or Whatyoucallem Terrace, 'Hyde Park, W.' And do not those whom the King delighteth to honour get houses assigned to them in Kensington Gardens, which are right alongside? I have no need at all to be ashamed of the eligible locality in which I am living until midnight; but, for 'private reasons,' I would willingly exchange it for a room in Brixton, or Islington, even Stepney or West Ham. And I'd exchange my immortal soul for a pound of steak, and a quart of coffee, and a hunk of the stodgiest bread that was ever made. Oh Lord, Jimmy, I *am* hungry!

But, *n'importe*—I've got to put up with being hungry, and I'll have to put up with being so all day long, and all the night, too. And I'll have to walk about from midnight until daylight; but joy cometh in the morning, my James, and joy this time takes the form of one half-sovereign—or, to spread it out into as great a sum as it will look, ten silver shillings. I wish I could draw it as one-hundred-and-twenty coppers, or better still, as two-hundred-and-forty ha'pennies. I'm sure it would last longer and go further than will the small gold coin that will be paid me over the counter to-morrow at the office of *Chippy Cuts* in Fetter Lane.

For you must know that I have become a literary man—I am in it now with De Quincey, Chatterton, Noll Goldsmith, and one or two other experts of the pen and the pawnshop. Were this the eighteenth, instead of the twentieth century, I almost fancy that the good Mr. Richardson who wrote 'Pamela' would reward my genius by hiring me to dust the shelves in his shop. (No fear, Jimmy—I'd be in the Fleet Prison.)

To be brief, I have succeeded in winning one of a number of ten shilling prizes, offered by the proprietary of *Chippy Cuts* to the reader

who succeeded in guessing exactly the number of letters in the last word of the last column of the back page of a forthcoming number of that great educational organ. I guessed six, and six it was, and I made it so because, turning over the copy in which I read the announcement, I perceived that the very last thing in that particular column was the name and address of the publisher, according to law, and the address was 'Fleet Street, E.C.' So I took a sporting chance, and it turned out that the editor was just the wag I had assumed him to be.

The morning after I saw the award, I went to collect it, but was informed that it was not payable for fourteen days! You will understand the things I said. But the fourteen days expire at midnight, and at nine o'clock sharp I'll be up to the *Chippy Cuts* cashier, and at 10 a.m. I'll be well into a very substantial and nutritious breakfast.

It is high noon, James, and the Serpentine looks very pretty. The sun is shining brightly; all the trees have had their leaves dusted by the slight shower of rain that damped my raiment in the night. The park looks at its best—and that is not saying a little. I am sitting about half way down from the bridge,

on the Knightsbridge side. Behind me the generally execrable horsemen and horsewomen who exhibit their poor equestrian attainments in Rotten Row are prancing up and down. In front a small boy with a toy-boat is holding vigorous argument with his nurse, who evidently wants to cause him to abandon a cruise upon which his soul is set, and accompany her home to lunch. Otherwise, the foreshore is deserted, except by divers waterfowl who paddle up and down, or lie hove-to in the sunlight, wobbling on the little ripple-waves that run up the lake before the soft breeze. The vehicles that have been driving to and fro along the carriage way across the water are getting fewer and fewer, as the people in them begin to feel that feeding time approaches, and tell John to tell Thomas to turn the horses' heads for home.

Occasional dead beats and loafers amble wearily past, dejected, tired, unhappy. As I write this, one has sat himself down upon the other end of the bench I am on, and, with his legs thrust straight out in front of him, and hands plunged deep in his trouser pockets, is gloomily contemplating the sky, the Serpentine, and the trees across its surface. He is a young man—as we mostly are, we loafers—but well set up. He has a clean-shaven,

sharp face, and every now and then, as I write, I can feel, rather than see, that he is darting quick covert glances at me, as if he wondered what I were at. His clothes are fairly good. With the eye of an expert I can see that his collar is doing double duty, having been turned inside out as lately as this morning. He wears a cloth cap, and his hair is very short. His tweed suit looks fairly well. Only one who has become accustomed to the close contemplation of things second-hand would notice that it is old and worn, and has seen much service under trying circumstances.

* * * * *

I have made use of these asterisks to signalize the fact that this veracious chronicle has been interrupted for a space of time somewhere about two hours in duration. The gentleman whose arrival I have recorded above has engaged me in conversation for the greater part of this interval—or rather he has engaged me as a listener, while he himself did most of the conversing. I have found him interesting in the extreme, but I am afraid he has found me sadly unresponsive and unimpressionable.

He began by asking me whether I had a match, and when I produced one from a waistcoat pocket, he found that he had lost

his tobacco. So I bestowed upon him a pipeful of shag. He then stated gloomily that it was a fine day. I agreed, and he plunged immediately into a recital of his grievances, and his personal contempt for London and its inhabitants.

'Here,' he said, 'look at me! I'm an old soldier, I am—I've fought for the bloomin' country, an' this is how it treats me. I ain't had a bite all day, an' I've walked about for four solid nights—four nights out in the street, mister. W'ere'd I fight? In South Africa, o' course. Colenso—that's w'ere I was—yes, I was there with Gen'ral French. In the Guards, I was. Grenadier Guards. Yes, we seen some pretty 'ard fightin' in South Africa. An' this is what they does for yer afterwards. Sickenin', I call it. Nice way to treat us blokes.'

I felt constrained to point out that General French was not present at Colenso, being on the other side of South Africa at the time, and that the Grenadier Guards, if I was not mistaken, were equally absent from Natal during the period in question. He looked at me in a sickly way, half suspiciously and half respectfully.

'Here,' he queried, 'what's your game?'

I laughed, and said I imagined that it was pretty much the same as his — resting in the park, and trying to forget that I was hungry.

'Ho!' he said interestedly, 'Ho—you're on th' rocks too, are yer? Well, wot are you doin' writin' there? Beggin' letters?'

'What?' I said, not properly grasping his meaning. 'Doing what?'

'You know—writin' to people—parsons an' such like—about your starvin' fam'ly. Pitchin' 'em a tale—askin' 'em to send you a dollar or so—for Gawd's sake.'

'Oh!' I gasped; 'no, not quite that. I'm writing to a friend, but I'm not asking him for anything.'

He was visibly disappointed in me, and looked a little scornful.

'I suppose you're like me,' he said sadly, 'wore 'em all out. I done pretty well that way for a w'ile, but it don't last long. At first I used to do pretty well at it with old ladies, but one of 'em see me shickered one afternoon w'en I should have been buryin' me dead baby, an' she put th' coppers on to me next time I wrote, an' I got pinched, an' got a month in quod. So that finished it for me. But'—he leant over towards me, and looked

eagerly wolfish—'you're all right, ain't you? Or 'ave they got you marked too?'

'How do you mean—marked?' I asked him, becoming interested in this new aspect of the Life of Leisure. He spat contemptuously on the gravel.

''Ow do I mean marked! W'y, if the police 'ave got you set—like they've got me. Are they lookin' after you all the time, an' blockin' whatever you do to make a livin'? Bust 'em—they don't give me arf a charnce. But you're all right, aren't you?'

'Oh yes; they don't interfere with me.'

'Well—w'y don't you?' He had become greatly excited, and glared at me eagerly.

'W'y don't you?' he repeated. 'You do th' writin', an' I'll put you on to the right marks, an' we'll 'alve wot comes out of it. It's a dead cert, I tell you. Can't go wrong. Nobody knows you. I'd do it on me own, on'y, as I says, they've got me set, an' I daren't look sideways at a parson or an old lady. They don't give me any sort of a show at all. But you're all right. You can write a good 'and, can't you? No! Well, then, you can spell all right, I expect? You'll do. Now, listen 'ere.'

With great vehemence, and no little

enthusiasm, for the space of one hour my new acquaintance lectured to me eloquently upon the complete Art of Writing Begging Letters, of which he was a professor of extraordinary attainments and not a little celebrity. Unfortunately, as he put it, his celebrity extended to the ranks of the police, and his fame resounded within the walls of New Scotland Yard, so that, though his skill and resourcefulness of invention remained unimpaired, his field of operation had become so restricted as to render the practice of his alluring profession almost impossible.

There are, it appears, enormous possibilities about begging letters. As a field for the employment of skill, subtlety, knowledge of mankind, imagination, and daring, the art of writing them is unrivalled. To practise it successfully, however, and with hope of making it a remunerative branch of literature, you must, as is the case in all the arts, devote much time to the serious and laborious study of your subject, and must ever bring to bear upon it an unwavering degree of intelligence, and an assiduous earnestness. He who trifles with it, and does not regard it with a certain respect and reverence, will inevitably fail. Witness the case of my instructor! The

lamentable indiscretion of getting drunk in West Kensington, where was the home of his benefactress, had resulted in closing its pursuit to him for all time in London, if not in the whole of England. He should, of course, have gone to Kennington, or Mile End, or Highgate, or any other place far removed from Kensington and the haunts of the old lady, before indulging in the pastime of intoxication. It was just such carelessness of detail that was most harmful and ruinous to a successful practice, and he had no one to thank but himself for his present situation. He spoke in an injured way, just as if he might have been a solicitor who had been struck off the rolls for the trifling indiscretion of confusing trust-moneys with his own private banking account.

Broadly speaking, I learned, the *raison d'être* of the begging letter is the universal one for all villainy and swindling—that at least every second person in the world is an incurable fool, with a perfectly appalling capacity for being taken in and cheated. And here, at the beginning, was to be noted the one great primary law. You must be quite certain and sure that you are dealing with a fool, or, as my teacher put it, a 'mug,' before you begin

operations. There are many ways of assuring yourself upon this point—so many that I cannot undertake to make out a complete list of those enumerated to me here this afternoon. If your chosen patron is a clergyman, it will be wise to attend his church on one or two occasions before you bring yourself under his notice, just to gauge his capacity for the reception of lies. If an old lady—maiden ladies are the best—it is worth while watching her for a little while before beginning operations, in order to learn what particular follies of charity may be hers. If, for instance, you discover that she subscribes to, say, a home for friendless cats, you at once become possessed of the means of securing a footing in her sympathetic regard. It is not a difficult matter to pick up a half-starved and mangy kitten, and you may approach your dear old lady through its troubles. You call upon her, and say you have heard of her kindness to dumb creatures, and how you hope she may be induced to interest herself in the case of your little pet. Its miserable appearance is to be accounted for by the fact of your own poverty. Some little time after, you write to ask after its health. If your letter be skilfully composed, it is rather more than likely that

her reply to it will contain a remittance for yourself.

He gave me many instances of the correct way in which to reconnoitre the ground in the beginning, and illuminated his discourse with several others showing the wrong and amateurish methods of procedure. It is never to be forgotten that success is very largely dependent upon the care and exactitude with which this portion of your operations is carried out.

Next to these essentials comes the indispensable one of a good memory. You must be extremely careful never by any chance to contradict yourself. The sad story of Mr. William Durkin well illustrates the importance of this golden rule. Bill, as my informant referred to him with a kind of regretful affection, had been a very prince of impostors. He had possessed a genius for writing begging letters such as had never been approached before or since his career had come to an abrupt termination. Faculty of invention, fluency of diction, insight, judgment of character, the power of correctly recognizing the psychological moment for an appeal—had all been attributes of Bill's that rendered him a very Napoleon of the Importunate Pen. So

successful had he been, in his widespread scheme of operations, that he was able to occupy a small villa at Brixton, and to support the wife of a gentleman who was resident in Dartmoor Prison for a term of years. He even found it necessary to employ, as a sort of secretary, a clerk who was 'wanted' by the police on a warrant charging him with embezzlement. He enjoyed all those luxuries and comforts which rightly belong to the man of achievement in any walk of life. For no less than six years he had had what might be termed, with no exaggeration whatever, a most flourishing and affluent career. And his downfall from his high estate had been brought about by just one of those simple slips of memory which it was so necessary in his profession to be ever on guard against.

Briefly, it happened in this way. Bill had applied to a well-known philanthropist in Brighton—whom, under different names and alleged circumstances, he had several times successfully exploited before—for a trifle of pecuniary assistance towards an operation upon the eyes of his little daughter, who was a phenomenally clever child of seven, doomed, unless the operation were available, to the loss of her eyesight. He had received, in reply, a

sympathetic communication enclosing a cheque for five guineas.

Just about then, Bill became greatly worried by the undutiful behaviour of his family—that is to say, by the lady whose husband was a guest of His Majesty's at Dartmoor. She took somewhat aggressively to drink, and Bill's usually careful exactitude was upset by such harassing affairs as having to become bail for her at Vine Street Police Station, and attendance at Marlborough Street Police Court one morning, in order to pay a fine which the lady had rendered herself liable to by reason of drunken and disorderly performances in Piccadilly. When she had returned to the little home in Brixton, Bill had naturally been compelled to inflict corporal punishment upon her —as any gentleman would have been compelled. A letter had just arrived from Brighton, enclosing another guinea for the benefit of the juvenile ophthalmic sufferer. In the agitation engendered by his ruffling domestic cares, Bill had written back his thanks, together with a statement that his dear little *son* was getting on very nicely. It was, perhaps, nothing more than a slip of the pen, brought about by a slip of memory—but that trifling inexactitude resulted in the destruction of Bill's flourishing

business, the breaking up of his home, and his own ultimate retirement from the Old Bailey into durance vile for a term of no less than seven years. No, you could not be too careful in correctly memorizing all the points of an appeal. The pathetic tragedy of Bill Durkin's downfall proved this, just as my instructor's own carelessness in getting drunk in West Kensington pointed a moral in another direction.

He told me much more, with careful elaboration of detail, and ended up by proposing a working arrangement between us. He was to be a sort of sleeping partner, who would be behind the scenes, and who would scout, and investigate, and prepare the ground for the eloquent appeals which I should indite to the ever charitable and eternally credulous middle classes. As a guarantee that he had no designs towards using me as a catspaw, or of keeping me in reserve as a scapegoat—should our undertakings by any chance go wrong—he offered to draw up an agreement, or statement, which would incriminate him equally with myself, in the event of detection, and allow me to retain possession of the document. He admitted that he had taken quite a liking to me, and painted in glowing terms the life of ease, luxury, and refinement which might be expected to lie

before us were we to join forces. We would, he said, 'live like gentlemen, and carry on like proper toffs.'

He had become, as it were, 'intoxicated by the exuberance of his own verbosity,' and when I bade him quietly to 'Go to hell,' he did not at first realize that my attitude was not one of playfulness. But when I further requested him to shift himself from the seat, adding that I would seek to assist him to do so, he grasped the fact that, for reasons of my own, I did not receive his proposition with favour, and he stood up and cursed me in a comprehensive, complete, and eminently obscene fashion. When I put away this note-book in my pocket, buttoned up my coat, and reared myself upon my hind-legs with an obvious inclination to make a demonstration in force, he departed. But, as he went, he continued to fling back remarks of an insulting and contemptuous character at me, and, as he faded away through the trees behind, the last expression of opinion which I caught correctly was one to the effect that, in his estimation, I was merely a 'Something Nark.' A 'Nark,' my James, is one who cultivates the acquaintance of policemen and detectives with a view towards informing them

of various and sundry misdeeds of his fellows, and in the state of life to which it hath pleased God to call me, the term is not unnaturally one of considerable opprobrium.

My Jimmy, my good Jimmy, I am simply famishing. The day is yet young—hardly six o'clock in the evening—and I have some sixteen weary hours to put in before I can hope to satisfy my importunate appetite, and during which I must ever vividly contemplate in my mind the kind of feed I could do with, and the sort of repast I would like to set before me. I have no doubt that fasting, as practised by ascetics, is eminently conducive to the clearer contemplation of the ethics of existence, but to a coarse and material scoundrel of my description it is conducive to little but bitterness, profanity, and discontent. And yet, my good old James, the one thing that I have left to pride myself upon, the peg upon which I can hang the merest rag of a garment of self-respect (a thing which I have never really had), is that none of my experiences in Queer Street have really resulted in making me bitter with the world. It is a good world, Jimmy, a good and gracious world, and, as Mr. Browning, I think, has it, 'God's in His heaven.'

LETTER XIV

DEAR JIMMY,

Since I wrote to you last—somewhere about ten days ago—I have been 'on the wallaby track.' You will know what that means. I cannot say that I have been 'humping bluey,' because I have had no bluey to hump; and even if I had had one I hardly suppose that in this free and enlightened land I should have been permitted to hump it. To make myself clear, old James, I have for a very short period been a 'sundowner'—I have been 'up country.'

My brief experience has taught me one very plain lesson. So far as London is concerned, it has long been obvious to me that it is more or less of a crime to be 'hard up,' or, perhaps I should say, to appear to be hard up. In the World's Shop there is no room for anyone to whom the shopkeepers cannot sell something, or their attendants extract some commission from, or their door-keepers some gratuity.

There is just about room for anyone as to whom there may be a shadow of a doubt. If it seem at all possible that he may be a buyer he is grudgingly tolerated. But if it is quite unambiguously certain that there can be no chance of making the very slightest profit out of him, he is a pariah, an outcast, and very nearly an outlaw. It is not permissible to murder him, but it is obligatory to 'give him Hell.' And he gets Hell. He is hustled from pillar to post; he must have no rest for his weary bones; he must be 'taught his place.' And he *is* taught his place with a thoroughness and directness that it is almost possible to admire.

But I did not know that it was so in all England. London has always seemed to me to be a place apart from the rest of the world, a separate province of England, peopled by a race that is somehow different from any other tribe on earth. It is true that I have never quite been taken at my real value. Some inherited instinct for keeping clean, some almost unconscious habit of holding myself up, and looking better than I felt, or really was, has been a kind of sustaining power to me, has kept me from becoming quite utterly submerged in the depths, and from

being hounded and howled at in the streets. But I've been in the midst of the hordes who are so treated, have realized that wretchedness, hunger, and poverty are unforgivable offences, and have long ago seen with unclouded eyes the whole prospect surrounding me. And now I have learned—not with bitterness, but with resignation—that what I have seen of London is true of England. There is no room for the man whose feet have touched bottom. He has been classified with those who cannot keep in the swim. And once, in this land of class distinction, he has been written down under any distinct heading, it will be a miracle and a marvel if ever he gets himself entered under any other, unless it be one of a lower grade. He is booked as something definite, and it is everybody's business to see that he keeps to the order of his booking.

The gradual wear and tear of the life that I have led during the past six months has a little shaken my nerve. Hardly knowing that it was so, I have slowly been losing courage; getting a little more depressed in mind as I weakened in body; acquiring, by infinitely slow degrees, a faculty of feeling sorry for myself; appreciating less of the humour of my situation and more of the miserable helpless-

ness of it; and becoming less capable of seeing, and sympathizing with, the distresses and unhappiness of my neighbours in Queer Street. It had been some strange consolation, in times of the severest stress, when I looked around me and saw that, if I were in a bad way, there were others in a worse way. After a day of starvation, when I walked dejectedly in the streets, having nowhere to go to, it seemed to make my lot less burdensome if I saw some poor creature overwhelmed in a mire of distress deeper and blacker than mine own. Not that I had any devilish satisfaction in noting anything of the kind—but the realization of it had a salutary effect, made me ashamed of my own poor spirit, caused me to say to myself something like this—'Well, now—what are *you* whimpering for?' Look there! you're not coughing up bits of your lungs, are you? Keep quiet, you fool, and don't cry out until you are hurt.'

But now I began to be less pained at my inability to assist such as were worse off than myself, to feel less shame at grumbling to myself concerning my own misfortunes, to realize more dread of the possibilities of evil as they concerned myself. I began to fear Queer Street rather than to wonder at it—to

dread the grim cruelty of London rather than to observe it as something of interest worthy of observation. Terrors began to lurk round corners where I had before only expected to meet with interesting unknown phases of the lower life. An active pessimism took possession of me. I would sit for hours in the parks, overwhelmed with a wretched melancholy that I could not shake off. When I had a bed and shelter for the night, I would lie awake and toss about, and think too many of those torturing 'might-have-been' thoughts. When I had money to pay for a breakfast, I would often be too sick with melancholia to eat any.

I had a dread that I would go mad. The roar of the streets, the ceaseless rush of hurrying people, the eternal grind, grind, grind of the mill of London terrified me. If I saw a policeman I would cross the street, from some vague fear that he would see that there was something (I knew not what) the matter. If a foot-passenger on the pavement jostled me rudely in his hurry, I would think that he could see too plainly that I was to be easily despised and shoved aside. My nerve was going. London was too cruelly, too pitilessly strong for me. And so one afternoon I fled from London, determined to escape, if I could,

from the maddening noise and noisomeness of it to the more peaceful poverty of country lanes and open fields.

It was quite immaterial to me where I went, but, as I was lying on the grass in Hyde Park when I made my sudden resolution of flight, and Paddington was about the nearest of the railway termini, I decided to escape by way of Paddington. I was rolling in wealth, for I had eight and ninepence, and the prospect of getting out of Hell quickly, and in the suddenest way available to me, made a railway fare to some place in the country look like money well invested. I was so keen on following up my sudden resolve that, instead of walking, I took a bus from the Marble Arch to Praed Street.

I could not go very far—as a matter of fact I had literally no notion as to where I did want to go to. The insistent idea that drove me was that I must by some means get out of London. For a reason which I do not recall I took a ticket to Maidenhead. In more prosperous days I had often been there, and perhaps that was why I went there now, and chose the Thames Valley as a refuge. I might just as well have chosen any other part of England, the reaching of which lay within my means,

but, in an indistinct way, I remembered that Maidenhead was a place you went to from Paddington, and as it was about the only name of a destination I could recall when I found myself at the booking-office window, I suppose that that is why I went there.

When I reached Maidenhead it was dark—at least, it was dark so far as the cessation of daylight went. But it was a clear evening, and there was a fragmentary new moon, and I could see the road-way—so, not knowing whither I went, and because Maidenhead had people in it, and lights and some shops, and I could hear laughter from within the houses, and talk that suggested happiness, and a piano, I fled from it, as I had fled from London. All people who were happy were hateful; any light that shone through an open window mocked me; every voice that did not complain jeered at me.

I longed for some great solitude where I could feel that I really was alone, where a knowledge that there was no human being within a score of miles would give me the rest of mind and nerve that I so much needed. I thought of the salt-bush plains at home—and the remembrance of little solitary camp-fires in the pine-scrub, of hobbled horses, of a saddle

hanging on a limb, of myself lying on my unrolled blankets, smoking, and gazing up at the clear stars, made me homesick and weary of England. I wasn't homesick for my people —I had long cut loose from them—but for that dear land of great distances, and spacious life, and clear air, and great familiar solitudes. God's own country, my Jimmy—God's own country.

At a little wayside inn with red, illuminated blinds, that was full of loudly argumentative yokels who played shove-ha'penny (an edifying sport) and talked unlimited rot, and argued illogically about unimportant things they did not understand, I had some bread and cheese and ale, and bought some shag tobacco and rested for a while. But the blether of the dull dogs who filled the tap-room sickened me, and I fled again into the night.

For a long time I walked—not knowing, and not caring, whither—along a broad road at first, and then through a network of narrow hedge-bound lanes. Sometimes, through gaps in the hedges, shone the lights of houses; sometimes the lanes were sunk deep in the earth, and it was as if one explored the bottom of a dry ditch. But there was some tonic in the air that soothed me, and took the jagged-

ness from my nerves—the smell of the grass, perhaps, and the faint whiff of leaves, that seemed so strangely pure and refreshing after the manifold blended stinks of London. It was quiet, too. There was no endless roar to signify the existence of life. It was indicated in a hundred gentle ways.

Some subtle influence began to make me cheerful again. I was glad that I had broken out of London. The cool night air freshened and revived me, and gave me back some of the courage I had lost, and in a little time I felt myself striding along almost lightheartedly, and just as if I had had some destination in view, or was going to pass the night somewhere, and not merely wandering through it like a lost soul let out of hell, all unfamiliar with the world of men.

Where the way went, I went. The thin light of the young moon showed me tall trees in the fields—elms and beeches—and sometimes a hayrick loomed up over the hedges, or the top of a house, or a barn. Occasionally chained dogs barked at me, and once I nearly tripped over a pair of lovers in a darker nook than usual. The man swore, and the girl giggled, and I went on. The quiet of the restful night seemed to have taken possession of me, so that

even the giggle of the girl seemed to desecrate something that was sacred.

I wandered into another village, and out of it again, and was in a broad road. A motor-car buzzed past me, its great head-lights dazzling my eyes, and the dust in its wake half choking me. It was one of the hated things from the world I had left behind, and, to escape from others of its kind, I turned again into a narrow lane, imprisoning myself between tall hedges, and went on walking. The lane led me up to a hill-top by winding ways, and was very long and steep, so that when I came to the summit I stopped, and rested, and sat down to smoke. There was a gap in the hedge, and I sat in it on the earthen bank, and gazed out over a scene of fairyland.

Dimly, faintly visible, a long landscape stretched away before me towards distant hills and woods. In deeper hollows of the valley silvery mist lay in long sheets that shone and gleamed in the thin rays of the declining moon. Faint, far-off noises were wafted up to me from a cluster of twinkling lights that marked some village—the shouts of children, the barking of dogs. Once, across a section of the scene, sped a railway train like a long glow-worm, and the sound of its rush and rumble came faintly

to me after it had disappeared. For a long time I sat there gazing over that peaceful valley —until the lights had gone, one by one, and the children's voices were hushed, and only now and again came the barking of a dog. The crescent moon grew yellow and more yellow as it came down the sky, and presently its light was put out, too, behind the distant skyline. So I scrambled to my feet, and walked on still, caring little where I went or how I passed the night. It was enough for me that this was not London.

I must have wandered miles about the country, and towards all points of the compass, before I began to realize that I was tired and needed sleep. But the night was warm, and I had become enchanted by the sense of freedom, so I determined to look for no shelter, but to sleep under the stars, as I had so often done before in other lands. So I made my way through the first gap in the hedge that I found, and lay down inside a field, and presently was fast asleep and dreaming, my head pillowed upon the bank of a ditch.

Pleasant, clean dreams I dreamed all night —dreams of free, wide, open life. The plains and the veldt were inextricably mixed in them —as things do get mixed in dreams—but every

incident was happy, and every scene bright and fresh and clear. Sometimes I woke for a moment and opened my eyes to the clear stars above me, and my lungs to the clean air, and turned over happily, and went to sleep and dreamed again. This was good; this was being alive again. London was forgotten.

The sun was shining when I woke up—the sun was shining brightly—and some one was hitting me with a stick about the shoulders, and a mongrel dog was snapping and yelping within a foot or two of me. I sprang up, not quite awake, and instantly the dog had me by the ankle, and I could feel his teeth through the leather of my boot. I kicked him clear, and kicked him again as he returned to the attack, hoisting him up in the air, and he fled, howling and yelping. And then I became aware of an infuriated man, who was coming at me with an uplifted stick. I dodged the stick and jumped at the man, and caught him fairly on the nose, so that he went over backwards, and then I knelt upon his chest, and got the stick from his hand, and threw it away over my shoulder. A strange awakening, wasn't it?

I was as angry as anybody could be who had been bitten by a dog and assaulted by

a furious red-faced man, by way of a morning greeting. And I did not know what it was all about, or what I had done to deserve such treatment. Two or three hundred yards away stood a farmhouse that had been hidden in the darkness when I lay down to rest. Towards this the man, having scrambled to his feet, began to walk rapidly, mopping his bleeding nose with his handkerchief.

'I say, you dam fool!' I shouted after him—'hold on. What's the matter?'

I caught him, and laid my hand upon his shoulder. He turned as if to strike me, but I tripped him up, and he sprawled upon the ground again. He got up slowly.

This time he stood and swore.

'Matter,' he spluttered—'what be the matter? You'll know quick enough, ye vagabond. What are ye sleeping on my land for? I'll have ye gaoled for it. Y' domned savage—t' come at me loike that there!'

'Steady, old boy,' I said to him. 'You came and hit me when I was asleep, and your dog bit me. It seems to me that the boot's on the other foot. What harm have I done by sleeping on your land?'

'Harm—how, what? Don't I pay rates, and ain't there a workus paid for out of 'em

for lazy rascals like you to live in? Ha' we got t' have ye roostin' in our fields, so well as if they belonged to you—layin' down th' grass an' spoilin' it for sheep feed? You wait till I get my boy up, an' I'll send him for the policeman. I'll show you whether you can come and lay about *my* fields. I'll show you.'

He was a miserable devil, with a miserable, skinflint face. But the face looked so funny with the blood about it, and his rage was so comically ineffective, and he was so clearly satisfied with what he had had, that I could not help laughing at him. This enraged him very much.

'See here,' he spluttered—'y're trespassing. Get off my land.'

'I'll go when I've admired your pretty face a little longer,' I jeered at him.

He turned hastily, and ran towards the house. I watched him running, and then walked out of his field again, through the gap in the hedge by which I had entered it, and along the lane down the hill towards the valley I had gazed over the night before.

The churl! And this was free England. A man must no more be poor in the country than in London, then. I was so sick of it that I determined to go back to London as quickly

as I could, and strode down the hill towards the railway station in the village, which was only about a mile away, as quickly as I could. There I found that there would be a train in an hour, so I took a ticket, and spent the time having some breakfast at the village inn.

And so I'm back in London, and I suppose I'll be there always. Poverty is a poor business in England. You must not sleep out, under pain and penalties of the law. I suppose if I had lit a fire I should have been liable to hanging. If I had asked for 'tucker' I'd have been imprisoned. Truly, it is a crime to be hard up in England.

Well, good night, old boy—I'm pretty sick with everything just now.

LETTER XV

DEAR JIMMY,

It may be that what I am about to say will seem to you a vain thing—the mere impudent assertion of a ridiculous untruth—but it is not so. It is quite strictly and unambiguously correct.

There may, of course, be a possibility that I am mistaken. I may be wrong in asserting that the grass in Regent's Park is green, or the clear sky overhead blue, or this paper, on which I scribble to you, white—for we can be quite positive about nothing. But within the limits of human fallibility, my dear James, I honestly believe I have only lost my temper three times in my life. There it is, and it seems a preposterous thing to say, but all the same I am very sure that I am justified in saying it. Why I introduce such an irrelevant subject into this letter is simply because the third and latest occasion of my losing my temper was so recently as last night, and I

have been thinking about it ever since, and wondering why and how I came to lose it.

I suppose every single individual may differently define the act of losing temper. There is such an infinite variety of it distributed amongst mankind that to attempt to delineate a type would be as futile as to describe a particular face or figure as *the* example of the human form and aspect. Just as every man's thumb impression varies, so does every man's temperament differ in a small or great degree from every other man's. But there is a common acceptance of the meaning of the form of words that holds good everywhere. When a man 'loses his temper' he departs or varies from his normal outlook upon life. Whether, like the old Norseman, he becomes 'berserk,' like the Malay, runs amok, or, like some people, shuts up and gets sulky, and broods over the upsetting cause—he becomes a different man to what he usually is. If we take it that his most usual condition is, for him, his 'sane' condition—then when he loses his temper, he becomes a little insane. Some people become insane several times a day, others once a week, or once a month, or once a year; others only a few times in their whole lives. Of this latter design, I think, the Architect fashioned me.

Whenever circumstance has caused me to become very much annoyed, or even enraged and murderous, I have nearly always been able to control myself, even to retain or assume some appearance of not being very much put out or upset. It is no virtue that I claim; I only note the fact. But for the fact I have always congratulated myself, always considered that I was a very fortunate being. And yet—so strangely is each one of us fashioned and built and worked—on each of the three occasions when I can recall becoming a little mad, a little chaotic and incoherent to myself, a little temporarily insane, it was about an absurd trifle that could not possibly matter, and was of no serious import whatever. So it was last night, and so it was on the two other occasions when such madness has overcome me. I will tell you.

About ten years ago I was riding in from Western New South Wales to the coast. My caravan consisted of two horses, one carrying myself and the other the packsaddle with my blankets, saddle-bags, and general kit. I had left Condobolin, and was making as straight a line as I could for Goulburn, on the eastern side of the Dividing Ranges. My way led more or less up the Lachlan River, and my

first port, so to speak, was the town of Forbes. Forbes is a good sort of place, a cut above the average Western township, so I stabled the horses there for a day while I had one of them shod, and prepared myself for the track across the intervening plains and mountains. I was allowing myself four days for the ride, or, may be, five. At any rate, I purchased at a baker's shop four loaves of bread to last me until I should strike civilization, in the shape of Goulburn, once more. I also laid in some American tinned meat. We had not at that time realized that fingers and trouser buttons were to be found in the tins, and regarded them as containing very nutritious food packed in a convenient form. 'The Jungle' has since enlightened the world, of course, but I must say that I have often staved off starvation on far more unsavoury rations than the products of Chicago.

Now, some little time previously I had been sick—run down, sleepless, a trifle melancholic, and generally 'off colour.' So a medicine man had prescribed for me a tonic, and this tonic seemed to be compounded very largely of 'the waters of bitterness.' It was the bitterest and sourest medicine that I had ever come across—there was about it a lingering acidity

and disagreeableness that required the consumption of at least two pipefuls of tobacco to remove after taking one dose. I imagine that strychnine entered very largely into its composition, but there were other and fouler things beside, and it was one of those chemical preparations which, by its very unpleasantness, seemed to urge upon the patient who took it the imperative desirability of making strenuous efforts towards a very speedy and complete recovery, which would render its further absorption unnecessary. Well, here in Forbes, I found that I had run out of the beastly stuff, so I took the prescription to a chemist, and got him to make up for me two large bottles, which would last me during the ride across country.

I started early in the morning from Forbes, and, when I was saddling up, packed my bags, as usual, with my worldly belongings and my 'tucker.' In each bag I placed, besides other evenly distributed portions of the load, two loaves of bread, and one bottle of the filthy medicine. I was riding Terence—you remember him—and leading Tess, who carried the packsaddle. Well, when I had hitched up the big surcingle over the pack and lit my pipe, I sallied forth once more 'on the

wallaby track.' In my pocket I carried a few sandwiches for a mid-day meal, so that there would be no necessity to disturb the carefully arranged cargo which Tess transported.

It was a hot day. The sun blazed down on me all the forenoon, and the flies were very plentiful, and the faint following breeze carried the little cloud of dust which the horses kicked up along the dry and droughty track just to keep pace with us. When we halted at noon it was for a rest that seemed at least well and toilsomely earned. We had a dinner interval of about three-quarters of an hour, while the horses fed on maize, and I boiled my quart pot (good old 'Jack Shae'), and ate the sandwiches. Then we resumed our march, and jogged along all through the hot and thirsty afternoon.

Sunset came, and still we plodded wearily up the Lachlan. I was looking for a river bend with some grass in it for the horses, wherein to camp for the night. But the big drought was on, and it was after dark before I found a suitable camping place, and I was hungry and thirsty and tired. I had been cheered for miles by the thought of a pot of tea and a feed of bread and meat and a pipe on the broad of my back beneath the clear

stars, and it was a heavenly sensation when at last I could slip down from the saddle, clear the horses' backs, rub them down with a handful of dry grass, and hobble them in an ideal little grassy bend of the river. And when I had done all that, and lit a fire, and put the pot on to boil, and pulled off my hot top-boots, I turned to one of the saddle-bags in order to fetch out material for a meal which, I felt, was well and honestly earned.

I unstrapped it, and thrust in one of my hands to pull out one of the loaves, and immediately cut my fingers on broken glass, and became aware of two very moist and spongy loaves of bread. I looked closer, and found that the medicine bottle had broken, and that the bread had, like blotting-paper, soaked up all its horrible contents until they were sodden with them. I swore a little, and turned to the other bag—and found that exactly the same thing had happened. Then, Jimmy, I lost my temper.

I kicked, bootless, those bags all about the river bend. I kicked the quart pot off the fire. I threw sticks at the horses. I cast my hat on the ground, and danced upon it. I raved, I blasphemed, I used the obscenest and foulest language at my command. I scattered

the embers of the fire. If I had had a beard I would have torn it. In short, for the space of five minutes I went quite mad—became a gibbering maniac, a howling idiot, a raving lunatic. I believe to this day that if there had been any one there to say, 'I told you so,' I should have slain him incontinently. For half an hour I walked up and down on the grass in my stockinged feet—and swore, and swore, and swore. So mad was I that I ate nothing, and lay down in my blankets, and went to sleep hungrily.

Next morning I laughed, and I ate some of the medicated bread, but that night any doctor in the world would have certified me insane. I had to live on that nauseous bread for the rest of the journey, but all the time after it only seemed funny. Just for the moment the realization of my fate was more than I could bear, and it put me temporarily over the border-line. Up to then, Jimmy, I had never really known what it was to go through the phase of insanity which most people dignify by describing as 'a loss of temper.'

The next time was in South Africa—at the fight at Karee Siding. You weren't with the squadron that day, you old skrimshanker—I think you were in the Bloemfontein Raadzaal

with enteric coming on. As you must often have heard, though, a division of infantry—under the command of a certain gallant general who can swear anyone in the British army out of countenance—attacked the Boers in front, while Johnny French, with two mounted brigades, rode round to take 'em in flank. Now, by that time, as you are aware, brother Boer had got into the habit of always expecting French and Co. to turn up somewhere near his rear, and, accordingly, he was prepared for us with four guns and a pom-pom, and he had the ranges marked. He was so much prepared for us that he let us come riding gaily up in close order to within less than one thousand yards of his position.

It was a beautiful afternoon—bright and clear, and bracing as only South African afternoons can be. We had started from the Glen station on the Modder River before dawn, and had made a wide detour all the morning, halted at mid-day, and then headed in at right angles to our former line of march. About three o'clock we realized suddenly and startlingly that we had arrived.

I had a box of matches—common wooden matches that were made in Cape Town, and half the time only sputtered on the box, and,

if they did light, seemed only to do so at their own sweet will. But they were very precious. I had paid one-and-ninepence for them to a brute of a Polish Jew who kept a little shop off Maitland Street, and had been glad to get the box at the price. I was the only man in the squadron who had any at all, and was consequently a very popular and much-sought-after fellow. When the other chaps saw me about to light up they used to come crowding round with their little strings of cordite—you remember how we used to pull the bullets out of the cartridges, and use the cordite for kindling purposes—and beg a light. They knew it was hopeless to beg a match.

Well, as we came riding up, like little innocents at play, to where the Boers meant us to come—I think it was the astute Louis Botha who arranged the picnic—I had just filled my pipe, and just pulled out my precious box of matches in order to light it. As usual, sundry of the other fellows sang out, 'Here, let's have a light, Johnny!' 'Give us a dip in, Corporal!' and so on, and were just gathering round, when plunk! *bang!*—the first of the Boer shells burst in the leading troop, just in front of us, knocked half a dozen men and horses over like nine-pins—that was where young

Billy Bonsor got killed—and set all the rest of the horses in the squadron on their haunches, and every man Jack of us into confusion. My horse reared nearly on the top of me, and I dropped the precious, priceless box of matches in the long grass.

Then the other guns whanged in shells through us, until the air seemed to fairly buzz with them. The pom-pom continuously sent strings of his little cracking missiles through our ranks, and a Maxim played over our heads like a hose. It was so sudden and unexpected that, for a few minutes, no one seemed to know where to go, what to do, or how to do it. There was not a panic—it was just a sheer, startling surprise. The shell fire was terrific.

And the way it got me, Jimmy, was just as the medicine-soaked bread on the Lachlan had done. I went mad. The artillery fire was forgotten. I just cursed and raved over that lost box of matches. I jumped off, and searched for them fruitlessly in the grass. I got knocked over by a riderless horse. My own horse, alarmed by another bursting projectile, reared back, and pulled me to my feet. I beat him with my fists about the head. I used all the bad language I knew of, and it was not until I saw poor old Alf Ackworth, who was after-

wards killed at Bronkhorst Spruit, and who was our troop leader, come galloping along with his sword drawn, and yelling for us to 'come on,' that I regained my senses and mounted, and rode with the others to the little rise, where we dismounted and went into the firing line with our carbines. It was not until I had dropped a Boer on a grey pony at seven hundred yards that I regained my temper. The shells didn't matter, the noise and confusion, and hot rifle-fire didn't matter. What mattered, and what sent me mad again, was the loss of that box of very inferior wooden 'tandstickors.'

And now, last night, I lost my reason again, and for two blood-red minutes was once more a raving maniac. Thus it happened:

I found myself in the evening wandering about the streets, luncheonless and supperless, with just one halfpenny in my left-hand trouser pocket. I was dreadfully tired and weary—so weary that I could scarcely drag one aching leg after the other. My hip sockets seemed to be endowed with every extremity of pain, my knees were stiff, and my ankles ached, ached, ached until I could hardly bear to put my feet to the ground. God—how they ached!

About midnight, I was walking down the Strand — hardly walking, indeed — rather shuffling, dragging, sliding along the hard pavements, which seemed almost to radiate pain, to be red-hot with the torments of fatigue, and cruelly persecuting in their insistent and remorseless rockiness. Every curbstone that I bumped my toes into seemed to have assaulted me maliciously, every cab that nearly ran over me at the street crossings seemed to persecute me. I was dead beat, knocked out, done up—and I only had a ha'penny.

I passed by a little food shop nearly opposite to St. Clement's Danes. You would not know about these places—nobody does, except by sight and hearsay, until he comes down to the stratum of society in which I find myself, for my sins. They are all over London, and they are a blessing to London. The food in them is good, and wholesome, and ridiculously cheap. (It is true that, when you only have a ha'penny, it seems ridiculously dear—but that doesn't matter.) I knew that my limited resources would provide me with a small cup of coffee, and by Jove, I needed it. So I went in, obtained my coffee at the counter, and proceeded to walk up the room with it.

The room has a row of little tables, with benches to match, down each side, and on this night, as is generally the case at the hour in question, it was filled with all sorts and conditions of men. Some of them were cabmen, some of them touts, some loafers, some fellows like myself who have 'seen better days,' some thieves, and some of that nondescript class too timid for actual crime, and too furtive to be honest, who ever infest the purlieus of Queer Street. As I stumbled down the room, worn out, and too weary to watch where I trod, my foot slipped, and I stumbled forward, with a fatal effect on the cup of coffee I carried. Nearly all of it was spilled.

Instantly went up a roar of laughter from all who sat by. That, my James, sent me mad too. I drank up what was left of the coffee, put the cup down, and stood up in that synod of ragamuffins and cursed them until I could speak no longer. I gave them the lingual result of every experience I have had —and you know that I have been vouchsafed opportunities of learning the intricacies of verbal expression. I think I excelled myself. The most prominent of the company I singled out for vituperative remark, and did them both justice and injustice. They seemed to

me to sit aghast at the flow of language I favoured them with. No one retorted. They all stared at me as if I had been a revivalist, or an ultra-fervent Salvation Army preacher, and made no answer. It was not until I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder, and heard excited threats of ejectment in my ear, that I ceased.

'"'Ere,' said the little man who served behind the counter—a little stout chap with a bristling red moustache—'"'Ere—get *hout*. I won't 'ave talk like that. Get out—or I'll send the boy for a copper.'

So I got out.

Just outside I stumbled into a man I knew—a journalist of Fleet Street—and he 'lent' me two shillings, and I got a bed; and now I'm here in Regent's Park, chronicling for you, old James, the three occasions upon which I think I have really lost my temper.

Forgive me for all this discursiveness. What made me do it was last night's episode, and the way it reminded me of the two other episodes that have been parallel to it in my life. Temper is a queer thing, and there is no accounting for it. It is nothing but lunacy. For my part there have been infinitely more trying experiences in my life than any of these three, which I have just laughed over. And

my point is this—we none of us know what will 'take us on the raw,' how, when, or where we will be so taken, or just how much we contain a capacity for going mad, and running amok through all our philosophies and habits.

Good night, old boy.

LETTER XVI

DEAR JIMMY,

Yesterday morning, as the sun rose, I sat and shivered in the Green Park, underneath the front garden walls of that row of stately houses at the St. James's end. I had wandered in the streets all night—between the City and Hyde Park—had slouched wearily from midnight to dawn through miles of silent thoroughfares, past leagues of sleeping domiciles, over infinite spaces of hard and jarring pavement, until my feet were shod with red-hot iron, and my knees were stiff from overwork, and I could almost have sworn that I heard my hip-sockets creak like rusty hinges, as I dragged one painful limb after the other. My body ached between the shoulders; each swing of an arm seemed to rend and tear my dorsal muscles, and in the small of my back some malicious demon was boring with an auger.

I was very hungry—not with the first pangs of keen and healthy appetite, but with that

direful famishing sensation of weakness that comes from long fasting under overmuch exertion. And I was so tired and sleepy that, as I shuffled slowly along, sometimes my eyes involuntarily closed themselves, and I believe that I slept mechanically, as I walked, for spaces of a few seconds at a time.

I came to the gates at the lower end of Piccadilly, just as a fresh-looking park-keeper was opening them. On his blue-coated chest were the two South African ribbons, and the sight of them—though mine are in a pawnshop in Pimlico—straightened me up a little after a painful fashion, and I endeavoured to look as if I were just out for an early morning walk, without succeeding very well, as I marched past him into the park. I don't suppose he was very much imposed upon by the tired loafer who was his first visitor yesterday morning. Afterwards, indeed, I realized that he was not.

I wandered out on to the grass aimlessly, found that it was drenched with dew that had the suspicion of autumn frost about it, and then turned back into the straight gravel path that leads from the gate I had entered by into the Mall, opposite Buckingham Palace. Two-thirds of the way down it I dropped into a

seat, thankfully and blasphemously. The curved backs of those deep-seated benches are delightfully luxurious when you have been afoot in London for six or seven hours. They are more comfortable and sumptuous than the deepest-seated leather arm-chair that ever graced a club smoking-room.

But it was bitterly cold, and I shook and trembled with it as I rested. Only that absolute physical weariness overshadows all other bodily evils, I must have risen up and stamped to make some effort towards keeping warm. But I was too weary. Had it been that I had come to rest just then in a freezing chamber, I think I should have remained seated while I turned into a block of icy humanity. There is a degree of tiredness which no effort of will can lessen, and I had reached it.

So I sat, with my legs stretched out, gazing across the green levels of the park towards Constitution Hill, wondering vaguely what was to happen. And a most extraordinary thing did happen. Nothing like it has ever happened to me before or since during my sojourn in Queer Street. It was a little miracle.

My boots were leaking badly at this time—

not merely admitting the wet and the mud, but even giving hospitality to small pieces of gravel and grit which worked in through their well-ventilated soles, and afforded me laming tortures at intervals. For two hours past a small boulder had been boring into the ball of my left foot, and the last mile of my pilgrimage had been a pilgrimage of mediæval penance. Because my socks were all in holes I had not, for some reason of improper pride, cared to pull my boot off in the street and exhibit the fact to the world that I was really 'down on my uppers.' For at most times I managed to preserve externally some semblance of respectability, such as a fairly decent suit, and a collar not more than three days worn, could lend to my outward appearance. The flannel shirt of three weeks' service, or the tattered undervest of five, were not in evidence, and sometimes I managed to get my boots cleaned—so that, on the whole, I was usually able to delude myself into a belief that people regarded me as one who sauntered about all day, and half the night, rather from choice than of necessity.

But now, here in the park, was afforded me a quiet and almost private opportunity of relieving myself of a minor agony that had at the last developed into an overwhelming

misery. So, having rested deliciously for about ten God-sent minutes, I painfully called my aching muscles once more into action and sat up, lifting my left leg across my right, and with frozen fingers began to unlace my boot.

To the sole of it was stuck a piece of paper. It had been pierced by a loose nail-head, where part of the sole was worn out. I pulled it off and was about to throw it away, when something in the 'feel' of it arrested me. There was a certain peculiarity about its texture that had an air of aforetime familiarity, something that made me hold my breath as I unfolded it, and wonder fearfully if the suspicion I entertained as to its nature could really be well founded, or whether I had gone to sleep on the seat and was dreaming.

I opened it, and saw at a glance that it was a £5 Bank of England note!

Suppose, Jimmy—if it is possible to suppose such a thing—yourself in my place. Imagine, if you can, that you are a homeless blackguard who, supperless, has walked about hard streets all through a chilly night in October—the English October, I mean—and at last, worn out, half frozen, hungry, hopeless, and dejected, that you have stumbled on the equivalent of

five golden sovereigns, which, in their turn, are the equivalent—for a time at any rate—of food and clean linen, clean raiment and rest. What would you do, my James? Well, as you can't reply to my question, I'll tell you. You'd begin by saying to yourself, 'This isn't mine.' And then you'd wonder what you'd do about it. And finally you'd take it to a police-station, or trudge wearily to the Bank of England with it, and put it in the way of reaching its proper owner. That's what you'd do—you epitome of honesty and rectitude and straight dealing. And that's just what I didn't do, just what I never had the slightest intention of doing, or even the smallest inclination to do, or suspicion that I might do. No, I smoothed it out, held it up to the light to see if it were genuine (not that I could very well tell), hastily folded it up, and stowed it away in an inside pocket, never once having the slightest idea of seeking out its owner and restoring it to him or her. I regarded its advent purely as a manifestation of redeeming grace upon the part of a Providence which had lately been peculiarly graceless in its dealings with Mr. John Mason. And I was quite sure that if Providence, through, perhaps, some temporary aberration, saw fit to make

me a present of a fiver, I was not going to make question of my title to it.

Years and years ago, when I was a solemn and rather good little boy, I can remember seeing a shilling lying under the seat in one of those old steam trams that used to run in Sydney. It was in Elizabeth Street, just opposite to the corner of the park. There was no one else in the compartment, and my first instinct was to possess myself of the coin, and I reached out to get it. But just then my nobility of character whispered to my conscience, 'No, Johnny; it is not yours. It is a sin to steal a pin. You will go to Hell and be burned up for ever and ever, amen, if you take that shilling.' So I didn't take it, and at the next stopping-place a Chinaman got in, and swooped on it, and put it in his pocket. And I remember quite well thinking how lucky it was to be a heathen, so that you could do anything wicked and sinful without its mattering, simply because you *were* a heathen, and had to go to Hell in any case. And now, how tolerant I had become in twenty-four years! I really felt, as I pocketed the note, that I had at least profited by the broadening influences of life as it is lived.

But, in a little time, Conscience did begin

to trouble me. I reflected that there was a chance of my breaking the Eleventh Commandment. If the loser of the note had kept its number, and had sent it to the bank, I might be seriously undone. But then I reflected that he must have lost it here last night, or it would have been found before; that people possessing fivers who sat in the park at night were probably there for no good purpose, and very possibly were intoxicated. And in view of the situation, the very desperate situation in which I found myself, I determined to chance whether the loser had the number, and whether I were charged with having stolen it, or not. Against 'It is a sin to steal a pin,' I set another proverb which would have appealed to unregenerate contemporaries of my extreme youth in the matter of the shilling in the tramcar—'Findin's keeps.' Loose morality, dear Jimmy; but the waistband of my trousers, and my waistcoat, were loose and slack. And I know of few besides yourself who would not be influenced by such circumstances. So, with an easy mind and an empty stomach, I fell asleep.

I don't know whether you dream much, Jimmy—I rather suspect not—but I always

do, and as a general thing my dreams are pleasant ones, no matter what has come before or is to come after them. If I were going to be hanged in the morning I believe I would dream happy things during my last slumbers. I don't know that it is much of a privilege to spend visionary happy hours in the last few seconds before one awakens to the realization that one is not really happy; but, next to the genuine article of happiness being vouchsafed to one, I think that the unreality of dreams does much to compensate for the unhappiness of life.

Yesterday morning, all in twenty minutes, I lay in my frost-covered blanket on the High Veldt, smoking Boer tobacco, ere the time came for 'boot and saddle,' watching the clear stars paling in the coming dawn, listening to the horses shuffling and stamping at their pickets, seeing the dim shapes of them looming up all about in the half-darkness, wondering vaguely what of riding and shooting the day was to bring forth, infinitely happy and content, as we used to be in those stirring days in Africa. It was the morning of the second day's fighting at Klip River's Berg. All the recollection of the yesterday was clear and vivid in my mind—the hard pounding

their big guns had given us, the strenuous hanging on to the line of kopjes that had been our portion of the battle, the rip-rip and rattle of the rifle-fire, the glorious blue sky and bright sunshine. I lay and smoked and wondered why the sergeant-major was so slow about turning us out of our blankets. It seemed that I had lain about an hour, when I felt his familiar toe kicking at my feet. I turned over, and heard him say, 'Now then, wake up!' And I looked, expecting to see his honest ginger face, and saw instead the scowling visage of the park-keeper who had opened the gates by which I entered. He was stirring me with the toe of his boot.

'"Ere,' he was saying, 'you carn't sleep 'ere. D'ye think these parks is run for you blokes to kip in?'

I felt weak and humble, and was about to move abjectly away, when suddenly I remembered that I was the possessor of five pounds. It is wonderful how a knowledge of the possession of wealth heartens one up. I immediately became fired with righteous indignation, 'told him off' for his impudence in such a fashion as made him gasp with astonishment, and wound up with a threat of reporting him to the authorities for his gross insolence. He

was quite polite when I had finished with him, and even touched his cap, and said: 'Beg pardon, sir.' Then I strolled off, swinging my stick in as jaunty a fashion as was consistent with the aches and pains that racked my tired carcass.

But I was something like the man with the million-pound note. My bit of paper was about as useless to me in the immediate present as if it had been a crossed cheque. Twelve coppers would have been of infinitely greater value just then. How I was to change it I did not know. It was certain that I could not do so in the Green Park. So I wandered down into the Mall and along to the Horse Guards' Parade and round into Westminster, and stood staring at the Abbey for full five minutes before inspiration came to me. Then I made straight for Waterloo Station across the river, hurried to the booking-office, asked for a first-class ticket to Portsmouth, and, to my great amazement, received change for the note, and knew that the day was won.

There was a refreshment-room open, and I fed. It would be nearer the truth to say that I guzzled coffee and rolls almost to bursting-point. A girl who had tousled hair and was only half awake served me. She was wholly

awake with astonishment at the size of my repast before I left that room—which was not for about an hour—and stood and watched me drink my fifth cup of coffee as if I were some strange wild beast.

I did not go to Portsmouth. I went to an hotel near the station that is much patronized by junior naval officers and marine subalterns, hired a room, turned in all standing, and slept like a log until three o'clock in the afternoon.

And now, Jimmy, with but eleven shillings of that excellent Bank of England note remaining in my pocket, do I solemnly—or perhaps flippantly—recount to you a piece of folly on my part which, even to me, seems to be about as amazing a piece of folly as I have ever indulged in. To you it will savour rather of sheer insanity than of ordinary folly, and with me, also for a time, there has rested a suspicion that privation and cynical despair had a little turned my head. But, reflecting upon it now, I can see that my performance of last evening was quite normal—quite thoroughly in keeping with the consistent foolishness that has almost wholly characterized my career. You are doubtless cognizant of the rather coarse and vulgar simile which likens a man returning to abandoned uncleanness to a dog returning to

his—well, I won't complete it, but in the present case it seems to me a peculiarly apt simile. Having some four pounds and odd shillings, I returned, as it were by instinct, to those unhappy and unclean things with which I had become unduly familiar during the time when I was approaching the wider end of Queer Street. For such things I have always been conscious of a distinct and definite loathing, and yet, for some strange reason which is not clear to me, I have always somehow drifted into them when worried, remorseful, or hag-ridden with anxiety. Heaven knows why—if Heaven takes notice of such affairs—I don't.

It may be—I know that in my own case it is so—that the indulgence in wild, mad outbreaks of alcoholic dissipation, unholy orgies, wretched shameless shamefulnesses, has something in it of the nature of a drug. Perhaps it makes one forget wretchedness and unhappiness, as opium is said to make one forget the real existence of such conditions of life. Perhaps it takes the place of physical action as a relief from the intolerable monotony of mental misery. Maybe it is just the outcome of pure, unadulterated 'cussedness,' but I don't necessarily think it is so. There must surely be a physiological reason for it, if not a psycho-

logical. We are as God has made us. Some men find a solace in prayer, others in hard work, others in drugs, others in alcohol alone—some, like myself, in the reckless perpetration of follies that are concretely inexcusable. For my own species I make no apology. I merely record a strange fact—one of the strangest and most incomprehensible in the whole strange incomprehensibility of human existence.

I am not going into details as to that unhallowed evening. They are, regarded by myself afterwards, too sordid and distasteful to set down in writing. It is merely with a wish to emphasize for your edification, old James, the fact that, of all the damned fools (in the fullest sense of the words) whom John Mason has ever come across, John Mason is the very damnedest, that I make mention of it to you here. When people tell you in the aftertime that your friend Johnny was a fool, you can be quite safe in assuring them that Johnny was perfectly well aware in his lifetime that such was an incontrovertible fact. The only thing he would really feel hurt at being represented as is a hypocrite. And I don't know why even that should hurt him.

I went and bought a clean flannel shirt of a dark colour, two collars, two handkerchiefs,

and a pair of socks. I meant also to purchase boots, but left that until I should have an intact pair of socks to expose to the bootmaker. Then I found some municipal baths, boiled myself, put on the greater part of my new wardrobe, made a parcel of my discarded raiment, carefully forgot it in the baths, and strode forth into the world once more.

I had no intention, no cold-blooded intention, of perpetrating the follies which I subsequently did perpetrate. They seemed to get themselves perpetrated automatically. But I had nowhere to go to in particular, and walked aimlessly across the river by way of Waterloo Bridge, back into the whirlpool of London. And there it commenced.

After three or four drinks, I became Mr. Mason again. After seven or eight I had no cares, no anxieties, no debts, no existence in Queer Street—no anything but a profound joyousness in existence, an exhilarating contempt for past privations, a great and lofty appreciation of the magnificent way in which I had overcome all difficulties and disadvantages, and a very fine and noble opinion of myself altogether. I forgot about the boots, even though I had the dilapidated pair cleaned that I was wearing. I forgot everything but

the fact that I, who had been poor and starving, was now affluent and well fed. I bought a halfpenny paper for sixpence, and gave two shillings to a sad-looking woman who vended matches. I was, in short, a very generous, kindly, and benevolent millionaire.

Some time in the evening I dined at a good restaurant, and washed my dinner down with a bottle of good burgundy. I had some liqueurs after that, and then I remember going out into the street, and—very indistinctly—that I had some more drinks. And then, I suppose, a great many things happened; but I have no first-hand recollection of them, and a blank—a hiatus—comes into my life until about five o'clock on the following morning, when I awakened in strange surroundings, with a confused impression that I was dead.

But I will write the rest of it to-morrow. The day's events have been trying and wearing, and I must go to bed. I am in the Blackfriars Road again, and not a little thankful that I am there and nowhere else.

LETTER XVII

DEAR JIMMY,

I feel better this morning—less ashamed of myself, and more amused with the recollection of my peculiar adventure—than I did last night. You will get these two letters pretty close together—in fact, by the same mail—but be pleased to consider that they represent two entirely different frames of mind. Last night I was rather unhappy, my head still ached, I blush to say that I felt somewhat repentant. This morning I am as graceless and unregenerate as ever—so much so that I hardly even regret the fact that but eight-and-sixpence remains to me out of the Divine gift of which I was the recipient the day before yesterday. I have come to look at the incident and its sequel in an entirely philosophic fashion. If I had sat down in the Green Park on the seat to right or left of the one where I found the note, well, I wouldn't have had it, and I wouldn't be worth even eight-and-sixpence at the present

moment, and I would have missed a peculiarly interesting experience. The latter I will relate to you, and you shall judge whether or no it was worth such a fortune as I squandered in the getting of it.

But before I proceed to a recital of the facts of this singular adventure of mine, before you become fully possessed of the natural horror and disgust which a knowledge of it must inevitably, in the first instance, instil into your mind, let me, my sad old James, point out one or two matters in connexion with it that may possibly help to alleviate your distress. Not that I could suppose you would ever be likely to regard the episode with any other feeling than that which influences me in subsequent contemplation of it—one of regretful distaste for such a thing—but I may be able to induce you to believe, for your own comfort, that it is neither a very rare nor unusual experience in London. What I mean is that there are scores and hundreds of men—who would be very much put out if they were not taken for gentlemen—whom you would have no hesitation in entertaining at your club, or inviting to your house, who have undergone that self-same experience. I do not think, myself, that anyone who was really a gentleman, in the

right and proper sense of the word, could by any possibility come into such a situation as would render the undergoing of it necessary; but then, Jimmy, a gentleman is a great rarity. I have met in my life about half a dozen. There may have been more, but I could not recognize them. You are one, I think. I never was, nor could I ever be.

Well, as I told you in what I wrote last night, I awoke yesterday morning amid strange and unfamiliar surroundings, with an aching head, and a confused impression that I was dead. Why the latter, I do not know, unless it was because I found myself lying in a vault-like place that was faintly illuminated by dim twilight, was very silent, and unconscionably cold. It was a long, narrow, high, sepulchral place, and I rested upon a kind of bench or shelf that stretched along one side, raised about two feet from the ground. Facing me, high up in the wall, and near the ceiling, was a little glazed window, through which the new daylight struggled for entry, with but partial success. The atmosphere was laden with the reek of disinfectants.

I got to my feet, rather shakily, and walked the length of the tomb. The walls were tiled, or lined, with some sort of glazed brick. The

end near which I had lain on the bench had a door in it, a plain rectangle of stout build painted a dark brown or chocolate colour, and near the top of it was a square aperture that looked out on to some sort of passage or corridor, in which shone a light. I went up to the door, and pushed it with my hand. It did not yield. I looked for a door-handle, but there was none, nor was there any sign of an inner lock or fastening. I was dazed, puzzled, astonished. I had never been in a place like this before. For quite two minutes I stood staring at the fast-closed door, seeking vainly to recollect how I had come here. Then, in a sudden flash of understanding, the mysterious apartment explained itself to me.

'My God—I'm in a cell!'

Figure to yourself, my brave James—as the French would say—my feeling of horror at this so alarming situation. I sat down heavily in the middle of the bench, and there was a lump in my throat, and a sensation of nausea below my waistcoat, and my lips became dry, and I could almost imagine that I felt myself turning pale, and my hair standing on end.

Heavens! What could I have done? Perhaps I had killed some one! God knew. I had no recollection of anything whatsoever,

beyond the misty one that I had had some drinks somewhere, after a vague and imperfectly remembered dinner. My mind was a complete blank as to all that had transpired between those dim and far-off drinks, and my awakening a few minutes before. I was stunned, stupefied, incapable of either amazement or any other deep feeling. My mouth was parched as from the effect of some terrible fear. I could hardly think of or realize anything. Good God! In a cell!

And what on earth could this place be? Where was it? Was it a jail, or a police-station, or what? There was silence everywhere, now and again broken by some distant footsteps echoing on stone floors. Why did not some one come and tell me what it all meant? Perhaps I had lost my memory for months, and had been tried and sentenced and found guilty of some bad kind of crime, without being conscious of what was going on. I had read of such things. The thought scared me almost to death. I sweated with the agony of the apprehension of the unknown. I got up and paced nervously up and down, and other and more dreadful ideas chased one another through my seething brain.

For ten minutes I must have tramped slowly

up and down that narrow dungeon, afraid, tremulous, bewildered. Quite suddenly I noticed an electric bell button on the wall beside the door. Almost literally I flung myself at it, and pressed until my forefinger was numb and cramped. No answering buzzing ring came from anywhere, near or distant. I panted, and tried again, pressing for a longer time, and still with no result. 'It must be broken,' I thought miserably. And so I sat down disheartened.

But the silence and suspense became intolerable. I could not bear it. So I got up and kicked persistently at the bottom of the door. After a long series of kicks I paused to listen. No sound came, no footsteps approached. I was desperate now, and had no scruples as to whether I might be aggravating my original offence or not, so I began again, and for a good five minutes made the cell, and, I hoped, the world without, echo with the noise I made. But it did not seem to have any effect, and at last I desisted and sat down, burying my head in my hands, and more than ever a prey to all unhappiness.

Suddenly a harsh voice startled me.

'Now then, now then! What are you making that damned row for?'

I looked up, and saw framed in the opening in the door a fierce red face ornamented with a bristling red moustache, and two steely grey eyes that glared angrily at me.

'If you get kickin' the door any more, I'll come an' take your boots away,' announced the ruddy visage.

I jumped up, and went to the door.

'I say,' I asked excitedly and imploringly, 'I say—what's this place? How did I come here? What's it all mean? Oh—I say—*don't* go away. Just half a minute, *please!*'

'Was that all you wanted?' and the grey eyes radiated anger. 'Well, you keep quiet, and you'll find out all about it. Now mind what I'm tellin' you. Keep quiet.'

The face withdrew, and I was abandoned to my pleasant reflections once more. Momentarily, I had an idea of again assailing the door, and demanding some explanation of my position. Wasn't there a thing called a 'Habeas Corpus' Act? and wouldn't some one have to give a reason for that infernal door being closed upon me? But when I thought of those fierce eyes in that red, resolute face my courage oozed, and I could only groan, and realize that I was in a pretty awful situation, and commiserate myself.

It may seem to you, Jimmy, that it was not such a desperate and fearful situation after all —that I was making a great moan over what in itself was nothing so very bad. But there is this about it. It is a most awful and dreadful thing to realize that you are confined, that you are limited and barred and restrained, that you may not open your door and go out. I have always hated to see a bird in a cage, a dog on a chain, or an animal behind bars. I have always felt that if I were to be so restrained myself I should go mad in a day and die in a week. The mere sense of restriction is the thing—the knowledge that the whole world is not wide and free to you, that you must breathe air that has filtered through stone walls, and see by light that is second-hand. And more than that—that men fashioned like yourself, having in greater or less degree all your emotions and your sensibilities, little better and little worse than yourself, are keeping you from your God-given heritage of light and air and liberty. That is where the saddle galls, my Jimmy.

I remember once being taken over the Convict Prison on Ile Nou, in the harbour of Noumea, in New Caledonia, the French penal settlement in the South Pacific. It was the

place where they kept the more desperate of the prisoners—the wild beasts who were dangerous to their keepers, their fellow-prisoners, and themselves. We were shown some dark cells which were used for the taming of the more refractory cases. It certainly tamed them, we were told. They used to get sentences of five years in the dark. Up to that time there had only been one survivor of the whole awful term, and of course he was a raving maniac when he came out. The others generally died in a couple of years.

Now I felt almost as bad yesterday morning as if I had been in a black cell on Ile Nou. I felt that a day would drive me mad. It may be a thing that one can get used to, but I think I would prefer to die than to spend a year in prison. And yesterday morning I did not know that I had not done some awful thing that might mean my spending an even longer period under restraint. So don't wonder, my James, whether I was a little bit unhappy. I was.

I heard footsteps coming down the corridor again, and went to the little window in the door and looked out. It was not my last acquaintance, but a great bulky man with a broad, good-humoured face, who was coatless

and collarless. Taking heart of grace from his benevolent aspect, I hailed him.

'I say!' I called with a note of entreaty in my voice. He had gone a little way past me, but stopped and turned back, and came up to the door grinning cheerfully.

'Hullo, phwat's *your* throuble, thin?' he asked good-naturedly. 'Oh, bedad, you're th' lad that was kickin', aren't ye? Now phwat made ye make all that row?'

'Oh, I say, look here; where am I? What have I done? Do tell me!'

'Gammon ye don't know where ye are! Sure ye've bin here many's th' toime before—now haven't ye?'

'No, I'm blest if I have. Don't even know what the dashed place is, or where it is. Where is it?'

'Why, it's Vine Street, me bhoy.'

'What—Vine Street Police-station?'

'That's it, sonny. That's jist where ye're fixed up this minit, as snug as a bug in a rug.'

'Good Lord!' I ejaculated, and the giant laughed. 'What on earth for?'

'Well, I think ye was afther buyin' up Piccadilly last night—too big in th' head t' go home, like a wise man. An' av coorse, whin a gintleman ab-so-lutely rayfuses to go home

—why, he puts up as a gin'ral thing at this here hotel of ours. Now, how d'ye loike th' bidroom accommodation? Wur th' sheets aired, now? Mebbe th' dure's a bit stiff in th' openin'—but they're noice rooms, ain't they?'

I couldn't help laughing. The man was so good-humoured and cheerful. I asked him what was going to happen to me.

'Well,' he replied slowly, 'ye'll go before the mag'strite at ten o'clock—an' ye may be hanged, but I fancy ye'll get off wid a loife sintence.' Some one called up the corridor. 'Comin', sorr. Aw—ye'll be all right. Cheer up. A few shillin's av a foine—if y've never rayly been here before. Keep a bould face, me son.' And he departed hurriedly.

So that was it! I was run in. At any rate, though it wasn't a pleasant realization, I had realized the worst. I had not, at least, assaulted anybody, or killed a man, or stolen anything.

History was made quickly after that. My Irish friend brought me a basin of water to wash in, and then a mug of tea. He offered to get me some breakfast for a shilling, but though I had about fifteen shillings, I found I had no appetite, and accordingly refused his kindly offer. About nine o'clock my door

was opened, and I was ordered to 'come this way,' and was conducted into a courtyard where stood that gloomy two-horsed vehicle known as 'Black Maria,' and I was driven in it to a police-court, and there fined five shillings, with the alternative of one day's imprisonment. I elected not to take the imprisonment, paid five shillings to a sergeant who lived in a little office at the back of the court, and stepped out into the world again—a sadder, a wiser, and a very surprised man.

As you will notice, I hurry over this part of the episode. It was the least amusing, but the most interesting. I had never seen a police-court before in England, and do not wish to do so again; but even apart from my own personal interest in it, I was pretty deeply impressed.

I do not think my trial and conviction could have lasted more than two minutes. In a conversation with the policeman who had arrested me—held in a passage filled with other criminals, policemen, ladies of the town, and detectives—I had been advised to plead guilty, say I was sorry—'An' maybe he won't do nothink to you.' He was a very decent chap, that bobby. There was no spite about him, though he told me that I had given him

a good deal of the rough side of my tongue, besides having been particularly insistent that he should join me in combat. It appears that he did this latter by putting into practice upon me a ju-jitsu hold which must have been particularly effective. I expressed my regrets to him that I had no recollection of his prowess. Afterwards, when he was giving evidence, he was asked whether I had made use of any bad language, and perjured himself readily on my behalf. He said that I merely made use of the expression 'damn,' whereas I am certain that if I swore at all I said many worse things than a mere 'damn.'

If you had been in London during the last few years you could not have failed to become familiar with the name of a certain magistrate who is constantly quoted and reported in the newspapers, and who is the possessor of a very pretty judicial wit. He has, moreover, written an excellent book of reminiscences. It would be to belittle his kindly humour to call him the 'funny man' of the metropolitan bench, but he is certainly the jester of it. In the newspaper reports, when one reads 'laughter' after the quoted remarks of a judge, an official, or a magistrate, one naturally thinks of a class of little boys laughing at the heavy waggish-

ness of a schoolmaster. But this particular magistrate is usually gracefully and genuinely witty. When I heard in the passage, where I waited my turn, that he was the presiding deity in this court I was a little alarmed, lest he should see subject for mirth in myself, and, on the other hand, a little pleased with the opportunity of observing him at work.

But I did not see much. My policeman suddenly said, 'Come along.' I went through a door, and came into a large and evil-smelling room, full of people. At one end of it sat the magistrate. He was writing when I came in and took up a position behind a little railing (the dock, I presume). Then—blue funk, stage fright, an attack of nerves took possession of me, so that I saw nothing much of anything for a few seconds. I heard my name called loudly, together with an announcement that I was charged with being 'drunk and disorderly,' and a request to know whether I pleaded 'guilty' or 'not guilty.' I murmured 'guilty.' The policeman recounted his adventure with me. Then the magistrate looked at me in a kindly way and asked if I had anything to say. Having a curious obstacle in my throat that prevented articulation, I shook

my head. 'Been here before?' queried the magistrate of a sergeant who stood beside me. 'No, y'r wushup,' was the reply. 'Five shillings, or one day,' said the Bench. 'Come along!' said the sergeant, and I came along, paid the five shillings, and, as I have said, left that accursed building, somewhat sad, very much surprised, and on the whole rather dazed by the rapidity with which the ordeal was carried through.

Well now, Jimmy, don't you think that Johnny Mason legitimately appropriates the cake for being a prize idiot? Isn't he just about the last thing in hopeless asses? Doesn't he deserve the proverbial leather medal with a hole in it, for being a very worthy, wholesale, and uncompromising fool? John Mason thinks so, anyhow.

I have always had an idea that everything was worth seeing once, at least, and that any experience was worth undergoing, provided that one came out of it safely, and with not too serious consequences. I have learned a great deal, in one way or another, as to various aspects of the many variations of life. 'Battle, murder, and sudden death' I have been privileged to study at first hand, and to draw lessons from them which have never profited

me very much. But I am quite sure that I found little that was romantic, edifying, or interesting about this last of my experiences. There is only this much that I can recognize as being gleaned from it on my part—an intense admiration for the patience and forbearance of the paid magistracy of London.

If you had seen the scum of the earth who awaited trial at that police-court, breathed the poisonous atmosphere of the place for even the three-quarters of an hour that covered my sojourn in its precincts, had your mind filled with the sordidness and beastliness of it all, you would quite readily agree with me that, to dispense the even-handed justice that those magistrates do dispense, bespeaks on their behalf the possession of almost heroic personal qualities.

Were I a magistrate, the very stink of the place, moral as well as physical, would turn me into a raging tyrant, desirous of hanging, burning, or crucifying all who came before me, —and, failing that, of giving them the very stiffest and most merciless sentences that lay within my power to give. How the particular magistrate whose acquaintance I made can find it in him to be humorous, I don't know.

But perhaps he recognizes that if he were not so it would be impossible for him to exist in such an atmosphere.

Well—good-bye for the present, old James
Don't be too shocked.

LETTER XVIII

DEAR JIMMY,

A merry Christmas to you!

Quite how long it is since I wrote to you last I can hardly say. But the untoward incident of the police-court occurred some time in late October, and as this is Christmas Eve, that makes it about two months ago—for I cannot remember having written to you since just after the sorry event I mention. You must forgive me, old boy. I've had the father and the mother of all bad times in the interval—two solid, mournful months of it—and I've not till to-night had the chance of sitting down for any length of time, or the peace, or the leisure, or the pen, ink, and paper necessary to the making of a letter.

I am in Blackfriars Road again now—but it is long since I could afford such extravagant luxury. My home has been where I passed the night, and much more often in the streets than out of them. In fact, I may say that,

like the snail, I have carried my house upon my back. My only roof has been the crown of my hat—at least, the only roof I could ever rely upon having over me from one day to another. It blew away once, too—down by Tower Bridge—but a kind-hearted waterman rescued it for me, and restored it. Otherwise I should have had to go unprotected from the weather, and although hatlessness may be a guarantee against baldness, it is not a condition that I should much recommend in conjunction with homelessness, hunger, and a London winter.

To be quite plain, Jimmy, I think I have come 'right down to it.' At first in Queer Street, and for a long time, I managed to keep myself, so far as an exterior presentment was concerned, fairly decent. To any but a close inspection my collar was not too obviously overworked, my clothes were neat, and not ragged, and my boots, if not watertight, were, at any rate, not disreputably eloquent as to my condition. Policemen and park-keepers used to reply with a 'sir' when I made inquiry of them—a thing I often did, simply to test my apparent status in their regard. But now I do not wear collars, my clothes are greasy and worn out, and my boots cry my dishonour to

a callous world. It is long since they were cleaned, and, indeed, I fear that the friction of a pair of blacking-brushes would hasten their dissolution even more rapidly than the constant work they get. I have no overcoat, and if I had, and any pawnbroker would give me anything for it, I would convert it into food. I have got used to the cold, but I cannot pull myself into becoming altogether a fasting man. I can cough and shiver, and yet keep alive—but I must eat sometimes.

The fact that I sit not far from a bright fire, and am sheltered from the cold weather that prevails just now, is owing to a singular encounter, and one which I had tried with all my might to avoid, that I had a few days since.

There was a fog on—a black, opaque density of fog such as you only get in London. At noon it was darker than during any ordinary night—so dark and thick that the street lamps were hidden overhead, lighted shop windows were almost invisible from the outer edge of the pavement, and all the traffic of the Strand, where I found myself, was held up from the Law Courts to Trafalgar Square. Nothing could move that had wheels, and people crawled and groped their ways along, dived at crossings

in a spirit of reckless adventure, and collided with one another, and lamp-posts, alternately.

But for the rawness and discomfort of it the fog made little material difference to me, for I had nowhere to go and nothing at all to do—except to hang on to the shreds of life that were left to me. And why I wanted to do that I have no idea. So I just cruised slowly along, apathetically indifferent to it all, and wearily careless as to where I went or what might happen. I had spent the night before in a Salvation Army shelter, and had had a little food before leaving it in the morning, so that I was not quite in the very feeblest condition I might have been.

Somehow I reached Trafalgar Square. Here there was chaos. Great ruddy, flaming 'flares' were alight at the corners, but even they were hardly visible until you came quite close to them. Yells and shouts resounded on all sides. Every now and then fog-signals exploded on the railway-bridge at Charing Cross, and sounded like distant cannon. Sometimes a policeman loomed up out of obscurity, called out something, and was swallowed up again in the gloom. For want of anything better to do I went into the road, and presently found myself groping about the base of the

Nelson column. Coming round one corner of it, I ran into a little fat man wearing a fur overcoat and a silk hat, and he was actually crying. He carried a small leather bag in one hand, and when I collided with him he dropped it, and screamed in the most curiously comical terrified way.

'Oh, my tear man—tond't rop me, I peg you—kive me dot pag. Dere is nodings in id!'

I knew the brute by his voice, and was minded to run, for it was a little beast of a Jew money-lender, whose spider's parlour was in Regent Street, and he had been my largest and most merciless creditor, and I hadn't had the least desire to see him for some time past. I kicked his bag towards him, and turned to go into the fog, and out of his sight, but he clutched me by the arm.

'Helbp me!' he whimpered; 'I must get to Goutts' Bank. Here, I gif you a sovereign now, and anoder if you get me dere.'

He was in a perfect frenzy of terror, but he slipped a sovereign into my hand, and so I led him back across the road with difficulty, and into the Strand. He whimpered and cowered all the way, and clung to me tightly with one hand, while he grasped the bag with the other. By going cautiously I found Coutts', and did

not overshoot it, and as soon as the little swine recognized the door he dived into it, and left me on the pavement. I laughed, for I knew Mr. Coltstein well, and was quite aware that the other sovereign was not likely to be forthcoming. So I groped away in case he should come out and accuse me of robbing him of the one I had had. I suppose the little tinker had a horde of his ill-gotten gains in the bag, and I felt sorry that I had not taken it from him and thrown it in the river. But still I had succeeded in negotiating another 'loan' from him, and that was a very wonderful miracle. It is through the generosity of Mr. David Coltstein, therefore, my Jimmy, that I am at present sheltered and fed and warm and writing to you.

But, my James, it *has* been a time—a very terror of a time—and I think that it has done for me. My papers have been sent for during these two months, looked over, and my term of further life decided upon. That is about it. This is the last festive season I shall rejoice in, so I must make the most of it. I am very weak, and, I think, very ill. But there is no use in pulling a long face, and whether I'm to go under in the street, or here, or in a hospital, or wherever it is to be—well, I won't grumble

very much, or be too plaintively sorry for myself, or feel that I could do with a much longer share of life. I think I'll be content enough to go when the time comes.

The very toughest of all the experiences of Queer Street that I've had have fallen to my lot in these two months. What went before doesn't seem to count now. It was trivial in its hardship—almost without hardship—compared to this period. For it was summer then, and now it's winter, and has been more or less winter since I wrote before. And what winter means to us poor devils who are in the narrow and dilapidated end of the street, you'd almost need to see for yourself before you could understand.

For when hunger and weariness ally themselves with cold you get a combination that takes some beating. In the summer months a night on the streets was bad enough. The aching fatigue that besets one, the weary despair that drives one through the friendless, silent thoroughfares, the gnawing hunger—all these are spirit-breaking experiences.

But add cold to them—frosts that numb your feet; chill winds that whistle round corners and lash you about the ribs; sleet that drives into your face until it aches with

pain; rain that drenches your thin clothes; slushy snow in the roadway that soddens your inadequate footwear—and then you have a condition of Hell, my James, that out-hells the worst of Infernos.

And remember that those who endure this Hell endure it in the richest and most luxurious city in the world. Remember that these poor lost souls are surrounded on every side by evidences of warmth, and comfort, and good cheer. They pass through worlds of happiness, and ease, and superfluous luxury, which are as far removed from them as if, instead of round London, they tramped their weary marches round the North Pole. Every lighted window is a taunt to them, every flaming tavern doorway a provocation, every well-clad man and woman a bitter enemy.

I have had a night in the snow. I have had many nights in the rain. And all this time I have been cold, cold, cold. What it is to be always cold I can hardly explain. You must go through it to realize it. The astonishing thing about it is that any human being can endure it—I mean that his physical constitution can stand it. Before I had been through it myself, I would not have believed that I could outlast it. But we are tougher than we

know, and take a good deal more killing than we think we can put up with.

All the day before my 'white night' the rain had pelted down. I had sheltered most of the time under a railway arch in a narrow passage that runs up from Farringdon Road to the Old Bailey. It is a dark, squalid thoroughfare, and draughty enough, but it was some kind of shelter, and I managed to keep dry. The few pence I had I was saving for some sort of housing in the night. In the morning I had had a breakfast which cost one penny—a small mug of coffee, and a slice of bread—and by nightfall I was famishing for food. I think I had sevenpence.

Towards dark the wind changed, and the rain ceased, but the sky was cloudy and wild-looking when I left my lair, and the wind cut like a knife. I wandered up into Smithfield, and there, passing by a coffee-shop, I could stand it no longer, and I went in and squandered fourpence in bread and coffee. It was ruinous extravagance, and meant that I must go unhoused through the night, but I could not help it. I sat there for nearly two hours over the consumption of two mugs of coffee, and about half a loaf of bread, and when I came out it was into a driving snowstorm.

Of the horrors of that night, even now, I hate to think, and I dread that I may have to go through them again. I used to fancy that London never looked so beautiful as when roofs, and hedges, and parks, and open spaces had been clad in a white mantle—that it was the only time when the dingy place looked beautiful at all. And I do still—but I know better now what a snowstorm means for the thousands who do *not* look at it through windows, nor turn from a contemplation of the eddying flakes to the cheerful glow of a bright fire.

All night I walked about—not so much in the hope of keeping warm by means of exercise, as in an involuntary struggle to remain awake and alive. I trudged for hours—through Fleet Street, up the Strand, by Westminster, through Chelsea, right out to Hammersmith. And then I trudged back again. Three times in the night I drank hot coffee at stalls—and I think those drinks must have saved my life. Once, in a dark back street, I stumbled over a prostrate body half buried in the snow, and did not even stop to see whether there was life in it or not. I was too weary to feel pity or sympathy for anyone, too badly used myself to care what usage Fate had meted out to any

others. All my movements were automatic. I did not think. I merely *felt* two things—the bitter cold and the necessity of walking. And I walked, and walked, and walked through an eternity of snow, until daylight came—half insensible, dazed, numbed in mind and body.

Somebody stopped me after daylight—for the life of me I could not tell you whether it was a man or a woman, or where it happened—and gave me some money. I don't even know whether I thanked the donor. All I remember of those dim hours is the sight of snow everywhere.

I must have gone a little off my head, for I had a vague notion that I was an Arctic explorer, and that if I went on, and on, and on, I should find something that I was looking for. And so I just went on, and on, and on.

The first distinct thing I recollect is the inside of a coffee-shop in Whitefriars Street, where I drank some hot coffee, and ate more bread, and coughed and shivered all the time. It was a dreadful night, Jimmy—a dreadful night, and, as I have said, I think that night has killed me.

Christmas Eve! A merry Christmas again to you, old boy.

I don't suppose I shall ever see you again—

I know I shan't—but that doesn't make my wish less real and earnest. Many of them, too! I'll not have another, and I'm thankful for it. Heaven knows whether I'll ever write to you again. I have paid for my bed for a week out of Mr. Coltstein's sovereign, and I have nine shillings left. So I shall have five nights of shelter, anyhow, and can reckon on living for that time at least. After that—perhaps another night in the snow. Maybe some one will trip over my body in a side street, and grumble at having to step over me. I don't know, and I care very little. All I know is this—I am tired, tired, tired. Good night, old boy.

LETTER XIX

DEAR JIMMY,

Again, it is ages since I wrote to you—centuries almost—and again I have the same excuse as before. The world has been very hard with me—harder than ever—and yet, in the end, it has been very good, and I have less reason to grumble than to be thankful.

This is my last night in Blackfriars Road. I shall never come here again with a shilling, in pence and halfpennies, and the sad knowledge that if I would rest I must not sup, and that if I would sup I must not rest.

All that is over. I am to leave Queer Street. No more starvation in the midst of plenty, my James. No more weary tramping of the streets through the night. No more semi-conscious wanderings in the dawn. No more cold and wet. No more dirtiness, and unshavenness, and squalor. I am to begin a new life—to come up out of Hell, to live amongst men and women again, to be some

kind of a man myself—but, above all, to live. You can't know what it means to me. No one can who has not been in Queer Street—in the kind of living death that passes for life at its narrow end. Hardly anyone ever escapes, but I am going to, old boy, I am going to be the one in the thousand who does.

And I'll see you again, and some day laugh over the strange experiences of the last twelve months, and tell you much more about them than I've been able to tell you in these scrubby letters, and every now and again you and I will go and pull some poor devil out of the street—just as I have been myself pulled out.

How strange and wonderful it is! A week ago there was no hope for me, seemingly not the very faintest chance that I would ever leave the street and live in the world again. And now there is the certainty of it. There will be blue skies again, sunlight, laughter—all the common good things of the world that you never know the value of until you have lost them. I am ten years younger than I was last week, and, although I am very ill, as light-hearted as a schoolboy looking forward to his holidays. Hooray—old Jimmy—hooray!

And now I'll tell you why.

It is a strange thing how, during my year in

Queer Street, some chance circumstance has always saved me in the eleventh hour, and fifty-ninth minute, from going right under. I have told you in my letters of a few of them, but there have been many that I have not mentioned, either because I forgot to do so, or because, as a rule, it would have been simply repetition. But I told you of how some one else saved me from suicide by doing it for me, and landed me in the rôle of an heroic would-be rescuer instead of in that of an unknown 'found drowned.' And of how I found the five-pound note in the Green Park (and the great advantage the find was to me). And how some one, whom I could hardly see, bestowed life in the shape of a handful of coppers upon me after that dreadful night in the snow. Always there has been some, as it were, special interposition of Fate on my behalf. But the latest is the most curious and singular of them all.

After that night in the snow I began to feel very ill—not merely weak from hunger and exposure, as I have so often been, but sick and helpless, as I had never been before. Sometimes, after a long fast, and when I had the means of breaking it, I could not eat. Twice in Hyde Park I fainted; but, being alone in

a quiet corner, nobody noticed it, and I came to of my own accord. I was here for four or five days after I wrote you last, but at length the contribution of Mr. Coltstein came to an end, and I had to go out again into the streets, and take up any quarters as before in the Wide World Hotel. I had two bitter nights in the open, and then, somehow, I raised the wind, and crawled back here for three or four days, more dead than alive.

Then again I was homeless, and, after a weary day, was faced with another night in the open. I was so weak and ill that, as the day ended and night came on, I felt quite certain and convinced that I would not see another morning, but would die somewhere in the darkness—on a seat upon the Embankment, or in a doorway, or in some narrow back lane, where no one came at night. I was too ill to care—too miserable and dazed to realize how bad I was. As in the snow, my very movements became automatic, and I walked about not knowing where I meant to go, and hardly knowing, as I went, where I might be.

Strange fancies took possession of me as I stumbled along. The lights and noises of the streets converted themselves into a hundred things that were not. Sometimes I would

gaze along a stretch of roadway brilliantly illuminated, and imagine that I was watching a bush fire; sometimes the humming roar of a motor-bus turned into the sound of a waterfall; sometimes all the blended din of the traffic became the noise of great waves breaking upon a beach. Occasionally I came to myself, and noted where I was, and wondered how I got there.

I must have wandered through long miles of streets, quite unconscious of all that went on about me. Hour after hour must have gone by unnoticed; place after place that I knew well been passed unseen; street after street, whose every paving-stone and lamp-post were familiar landmarks, have been traversed unknowingly. I was as a man in a trance, or a sleep-walker—indeed, almost as some disembodied spirit prowling about invisibly.

I don't think anyone took any notice of me. Perhaps I walked without staggering, and did not look any different to the hundreds of outcasts who nightly wander in the West End. Perhaps I did not talk aloud to myself, as I have heard so many of them doing, or indulge in violent gesticulation, or shouts, or yells. At any rate, no one interfered with me. I was conscious of perpetually passing policemen

whose height my sick fancy exaggerated enormously, so that they looked like giants who strode amongst crowds of pigmy people. I was afraid of them sometimes, and sometimes they seemed to me to be the only friends I had in the world. Sometimes the crowd looked to me like a mob of devils who swayed about me with the intention of tearing me to pieces; a moment or two after they became transfigured into throngs of benevolent and gracious souls who were urging their help upon me. Now and again I lost all consciousness of their very existence, and was alone in great spaces with no company but my own thoughts, and no impression of the present at all, and was living in the past. Once I saw the unhappy face of Doris—you remember that girl whom I sent home to Devonshire—and she passed me by in the dark, and did not seem to see me. It is likely enough that I really did see her, but I don't know. I must have been quietly delirious that night.

The last thing I remember of it all is seeing two great flaring lights that shone in my face and blinded me. I seemed to be looking at them for years and years, and speculating idly for half a lifetime as to what they might be, and why they kept getting larger and larger,

and their glare more blinding and dazzling. And then, suddenly, they went out, and I felt some kind of a blow, and went quietly to sleep, and when I woke up I was lying on a sofa in a room, and standing by me was the six feet of Jan Potgieter.

You remember him—the big Boer you shot in the leg at Maas Drift, when he and three others chased us from the water-side? You remember how we tied up his wound, and stood by him when those Kaffirs came and wanted to cut his throat? Well, there he was, trying to pour brandy down my throat, and rubbing my hands, and looking as concerned and unhappy about me as if I was really worth being unhappy and concerned about.

It seems that, when crossing Piccadilly Circus, Jan was just in time to pull me from the front of a motor-car, at the lights of which I stood staring stupidly. He did not know me at first, but as I lay on the ground he recognized me, and hastily calling a cab, drove me to his rooms in Jermyn Street. He knew me because I had a beard, as I had in Africa when we met before, and when I lay still on the ground he very naturally concluded that I was drunk, and, like the good Samaritan he

was, brought me home to Jermyn Street to save me from the police. It was only when he got me there that he saw how thin and starved and sick I was.

It did not seem anything miraculous to me that I should have been rescued by a Dutchman whom I had not seen or heard of for more than five years, or strange that he should step out of the Transvaal across all that time just to save me from a motor-car in Piccadilly. I was still so weak and dazed that I left all the talking to my host, accepted the situation as it stood, and took everything for granted. He told me all about himself—how he had made money since the war, more money than he knew what to do with, and was now a very rich man. I gathered, vaguely, that he had made it in some mining speculations, but how I was too bewildered to understand. When I tried to get to my feet, in order to go, he pushed me gently back on to the sofa.

'No, no,' he cried, 'you must stay here to-night. It is my turn now. You have been good to me once, you and your friend—now I am to be good to you.'

I gave in. He pressed me into telling him about myself, and at last I did so. I told him the whole story, leaving out nothing—begin-

ning with 'X,' and recounting all the adventures of Queer Street. He listened with a sympathy that was infinitely kind, and when I had finished the miserable yarn, he grasped my hand, and said:

'It is all right now, my poor John Mason. It is all right now. Come, you shall have my bed to-night, and to-morrow we shall see what is to be done.'

So he gave me his bed, whilst he slept himself on the hearthrug in the sitting-room.

When to-morrow came he told me that he had to go to Paris that day on some important business, but he would be back in a week. He insisted upon my taking £10—'as a loan,' he said—to see me over until he came back. And he begged me to see a doctor as soon as I could. I am to see one to-morrow, and so I'll finish this letter with what he says.

Jan Potgieter wants me to stay with him in the Transvaal, and I said I would, and that is how I am to escape from Queer Street. Even now, to me, the whole thing seems more like a fairy-tale than real life. I did not think that any kindness could have been left in the world, and, if there were any, that some of it should ever have come my way, or ever have been

likely to come my way again, seemed as impossible a thing as I could well conceive.

But I will finish this in a few days, and tell you what the doctor has said, and what is to happen. Even now I can hardly believe it all myself. So unreal does it seem, that I have come back to this place in order, I think, that the change of circumstances may not seem too sudden.

* * * * *

It is three days since I wrote that, and I am writing now from Jan Potgieter's rooms in Jermyn Street.

Well, old boy, I don't think I am to leave Queer Street after all. I went to see a doctor —a pretty heavy gun of a doctor—in Harley Street, and during three successive visits he examined me, and finally he brought in a verdict of 'Guilty'; and, although he did not say it in so many words, I am pretty sure that he sentenced me to death. It seems that I have some tubercular affection which is one of those things that kills nine times and spares once. If I had any constitution left, there might be the one chance for me, but it seems that I have nothing to draw on.

Jan Potgieter was back in London when I

went last to see the medical man, and he came with me. Afterwards they consulted together, and now Jan tells me I am to go into a Nursing Home, and that he will be responsible for the expense of it, and that when I am better I am to go out to South Africa, and be his secretary. I laughed when he said this, and asked him, 'Didn't the doctor tell him definitely that I was done for?' He made no reply, but his brown eyes were moist when he looked at me, and I knew well enough how things stood; but still he persisted in the fiction that I would be better one day, and that he could stop the expense of all this out of my salary when I had been some time with him in Africa, and lied away, in his kindness and goodness, just to cheer me up. The doctor recommended a home, and I am to go there to-morrow evening, because Jan has to sail for South Africa to-morrow, and I am to see him off at Waterloo in the middle of the day.

So that is how it is, Jimmy. I'm too tired to tell you much more. Jan begs me to give you his regards, and to tell you that it will be all right with me, and that 'all shall come right'—you remember the old Boer proverb. He is always applying it to me.

I am too weary and weak to think much

over this strange turn my fortunes have taken —I am just going to accept it as it has come. If I get better—and I hardly believe that I shall—perhaps I'll be able to make the good Jan some return. If I don't, I don't think he is the kind to grumble. In fact, he told me as much. For some absurd reason, he is most tremendously grateful to you and me for not abandoning him that morning at Maas Drift. I have argued with him about it, but he still maintains that it was quite a noble thing to stick to him, especially after his little lot had tried to wipe us out, and would have done so if those Kaffirs had not turned up. That we did not leave him to be dealt with by the Kaffirs he considered something most extraordinary. He says he thinks he would have left us. But I have my doubts over that.

It may be some time before I write to you again. I am really very ill—much more so than I like to admit, even to myself. I am keeping up so as to say good-bye to Jan. On the evening of the day he has sailed from Southampton—that is to-morrow evening—I am to go to the Nursing Home, and to bed. I look forward to it. Just think of weeks of rest and quietness after the kind of life I have had during the last year! Even if I am not

to leave there again, I don't mind very much. I want rest, peace, quietness, and am not very particular whether it lasts for two months or for eternity. Good night, old man. I am too tired to write any more. Good night.

LETTER XX

DEAR JIMMY,

So this is the last of my long-winded epistles to you—the very last you'll have to read of the lot. Maybe that will cheer you up a bit, and maybe it won't. To me, indeed, the fact brings something of relief, though I've derived a queer sort of satisfaction from telling you things that I've told to no one else. What you will do with the edifying series I don't know, and I don't care. Only that you never were the sort of chap who would say, 'I told you so,' I might suggest that they would serve in the light of an awful example. They would hardly, to be sure, do for shaving papers, being written upon slips too small for the purpose. If matches were not so cheap it would have been worth while to twist them up into spills for pipe-lighting. Otherwise I can think of their serving no useful purpose.

But isn't it strange, Jimmy—the way one's habits stick, even to the end? *I* know, per-

fectly well, and you know too, that my ghost would be damnably disappointed were you not to print them, and serve them out to a long-suffering public in some form or other after their writer has gone out. It is just the old vanity—the queer contrariness that has always been mine, of wanting to seem as if I did not care about things as to which I really care very much indeed. It is all humbug. If you don't publish them some time, I'll haunt you —only, for God's sake, old man, don't make them into a rotten novel, and me into a hero, or a villain, or anything of that sort. They are true—the only outward truth in the whole of my deceptive existence, and perhaps, just to oblige me, dear old slab-sides, you'll not monkey with them too much. Put in the stops when they're wanted, and tone down the bad language a bit, and use the blue pencil at your discretion—but don't apologize, or extenuate, or preface them with your own kindly, well-intentioned excuses for me; and again, above all, don't make them into a novel. For it would necessarily be a Novel with a Purpose —the noble purpose of dissuading other duffers from going the way this duffer has gone.

After all, I bear the Way no ill-will, and why should I selfishly seek to be the means of

discouraging others from going to the dogs? The dogs, themselves, may be fearsome bow-wows enough—but the Way is not so bad—not so very bad after all. At any rate, even in its muddiest or its rockiest stretches I've found something in it to amuse me. It has been hard travelling, sometimes, but the scenery has always been good—like the Razor-back track down from the summit of the Square Mountain at home on Mullala, where the broken basalt rips the shoes from your horse, and there is a precipice upon either side—but the wide world, and its goodness, to North of you and to South of you. And I've never really had a purpose in my life, have I? So don't inconsistently endow me with one when I am dead.

For that's it, Jimmy—I'm going to be dead soon. I'm going to 'croak,' to 'peg out,' to 'shuffle off this mortal coil,' 'hand in my checks,' have 'lilies on my chest' (but I doubt if it will be such expensive post-mortem adornment here), 'kick the bucket,' 'shove up daisies'—and all that, and all that. I'm going to be dead, and then I'm going to decompose. And that, Jimmy, is all I know about it, and pretty well all that you, or anyone else, knows about it either.

The doctor who looks after me here is a youngish man and a good sort. His manner is a little nervous and deferential, as if he only propounded his medical opinions and tendered his advice with the very greatest respect for your own vast and unlimited knowledge of his science; but he is a man, and a ginger-haired Scot to boot. I like him. He came in last night, and sat on the foot of the bed, and looked at me for a while without speaking. He had told me yesterday that his bull-terrier bitch had had pups, so I asked him how many he had kept. His face lighted up at once.

'Just two,' he said, 'only two. She's young for more. But, man, they're two beauties—a dog and a bitch. Ye should see the dog—he'll be a prize-winner, as sure as God made little apples. At least, I'm thinking he will. Black patch over the eye—just like the mother. The other one's all right too, but I like yon dog best.'

So I told him a story of a dog I once owned, which, as it is not a true story, I will not set down here, and he became vastly interested, being a very doggy man. So I told him another which was even more untrue than the first, and he laughed until the tears ran down; and just then the nurse looked in

the door and said, 'Good evening, doctor,' and he became professionally grave and solemn, and again looked at me queerly, as he had done at first.

'Mason,' he said slowly, 'you are going to die.'

'Am I?' I said, pretending not to be interested. 'When?'

'Man, it's a hard thing to say to you, but ye can't live a fortnight. Ye might go to-night—ye might go to-morrow, but go ye must, and that soon. I had to tell you, Mason—I had to tell you. No use beating about, Mason, old chap—I had to tell you. Can I do anything?'

No, there was nothing to be done. He stayed and talked a little longer, and then said good night. As he turned to say it, with his hand on the door-knob, it occurred to me that I could make him one request, at least, which would be dear to his heart, and the fulfilment of which might perpetuate my memory in some small degree. I knew it would please him.

So I called him back, and, as he leaned over the bed, I whispered to him, 'Doctor, you might name the dog pup after me.'

He beamed, and I think his eyes glistened a

little. He is not a man of many words, and he promised and went, and I had leisure to turn round and look at Death.

There he was, right enough—the Grey Man. You and I have often looked at him together, old Sobriety, haven't we? And you have seen him all by yourself, and so have I, and I don't think either of us have been very much in awe of him after the first couple of meetings. We have certainly both discovered that he is by no means the bogey-man of the popular idea. Once or twice I have almost gone to look him up myself. He is a dear fellow in most respects.

Do you remember the first occasion when we both attended one of his 'At Homes'—one of his larger garden-parties, so to speak? (He had, of course, called upon us individually before, but that was the first time we had been to one of his 'crushes.') Can't you just see it now? That staff-officer with the red face was merely a footman who pronounced our names as we passed through the door. We, as it were, were chaperoned by the battery of Horse Artillery we escorted when we made our début. What a fine morning it was as we trotted down that slope! How blue the sky as we came into Death's garden! How gentle

the soft breeze that swayed all those miles of gleaming yellow grass in the plain! How strange to see the ground in front being kicked up everywhere in little splashes, and to hear those whispering voices flitting and sighing by one's ears! And how queer to see the Grey Man going about amongst his guests—playfully digging one in the ribs, patting another on the head, doubling up a third, in his boisterous mirth. I, for one, have always owned that I was a little embarrassed that morning. Our host was so ubiquitous, so overwhelmingly energetic. I think that we all stood a little in awe of him then. We had not got to know him properly; his quips and his jests were not quite understandable; his merry conceits not so obvious as they became afterwards. We met him with 'company manners.' But how we rose to his humour when he entertained us afterwards, what a good old sport we discovered him to be! How gorgeous it was to win the odd trick from him, when he held a no-trump hand with a long suit in spades and the four aces! And how willing he always was to play. Good old Grey Man!

But last night, when I turned to nod good evening to him, there was a difference. He was courteous, but not merry. His manner

was not cold, but neither was it effusively warm. I asked him whether he wished to play. 'No,' he said kindly, 'there is no more play. This is the end of the game, and I've won; and it's for keeps.'

And I knew it was for 'keeps,' and that I was 'mucked,' and so I turned over and went to sleep.

* * * * *

It is three days since I wrote that, and here I am still. The Old Boy sits silently by my bed. He is disinclined for conversation, so I lie and think. Aye—Jimmy, you old son of a gun—think, think, think! Ever tried it? No—I didn't mean that. I know you do—always for others, though, and not like we reckless egoists whose most altruistic cogitations invariably involve ourselves. I dare swear you'll do a lot of thinking for me when you've read the last of these slips—a devil of a lot—and I know that if the missus, even, comes along as you finish them off you won't be able to speak for a moment or two, and you'll blow your nose noisily, and your eyes will look rather as if you had been on the jag all night. I know you—you soft old contradiction—with your leg-of-mutton fist, your bull's voice, and your heart of a little child,

and it comforts me, Jimmy, it comforts me—comforts me as if I were a woman. And so does the recollection of Jan Potgieter's goodness.

I have always morally 'cracked hardy. Now, 'cracking hardy' is a fine thing some times. To weak natures the mere exertion, the mere sense of seeking to demonstrate to one's fellow-creatures that one doesn't care twopence, is stimulating. Of itself, it bucks one up. When one is caned as a little boy it takes the smart out of the cuts if one can successfully maintain the fiction that they didn't hurt. When one has been badly done, later in life, it is by way of encouraging one to a continuance of existence if there be a consciousness that the world is unable to say, 'See how sorry he is for himself!' The cuts hurt without doubt, and the 'doing' hurts. One is under no delusion as to *those* facts. But both would hurt twenty-five per cent. more if one knew that one had asked for pity. Pity and Mercy are beautiful, but horribly galling to their victims.

But, for myself, however hardy I may crack, I am always conscious that I could not crack at all if I did not know there was some one human being at least who would be sorry for

me, some one who would care if he (there used to be 'shes,' too) knew, and that, whether the blame was mine or not mine. And, thank God, I *do* know that, old Jimmy-boy, and, as I said before, it comforts me. As I write you don't know, but as you have read you do. And so, though the nurses and the carroty doctor admire my philosophical way of meeting the Grey Man, they don't understand that, if it were not for the mere fact of the existence of one beefy, stolid, sterling, sound man, I would probably be lamenting my misspent life, invoking the moral support of a clergyman, and getting ready for the going-out process with not a little fear, and with a great amount of trembling. You see, old boy, though you won't have realized it at the time, you will really be holding my hand, and saying 'Take care of yourself,' when I go out with Death—and it comforts me, Jimmy, it comforts me.

But about this business of dying. It may cheer you to know that I shall have 'passed away painlessly'—that is, of course, provided that my friend Ginger knows what he is talking about. The only unfortunate thing is that I don't know when the Grey Man will stand up and beckon—it may be before I finish this slip.

It will certainly be within the fourteen days the doctor has given me. So much as that, I think, may be relied upon. As to aught else, I dunno.

It's like this with me now. I sit, half propped up in bed, with a little table thing across my knees, and the open window facing me. The room is bare of everything—barring me, and the bed, and a bedside table, and one or two pieces of more or less indispensable sick-room furniture. Outside the window is the top of a tree, freshly green in its spring clothing. Beyond that a high wall, blank and windowless, and crowned by a low-pitched roof of slate. I know how many slates there are in that portion of it which is framed by the window—one thousand and forty-four, or it may be fifty-four. (It was a laborious job counting them, but it had to be done, James.) Over the roof there is sometimes a strip of blue sky. More often it is grey—the London colour-note, as one may have remarked before in the course of these epistles. From some invisible chimney on the other side of the roof thin smoke curls up all day long. When the sky is blue, the smoke generally goes straight up. When there are grey days, it mushrooms, and eddies, and drifts along the ridge of the roof.

In the mornings I read the *Daily Wail.* I like the *Wail.* It is vital and mendacious. I am not vital, and now I am not mendacious, —though I have seen the time, Jimmy, I have seen the time when—I read nothing else. My tenure of life is too uncertain to begin a novel. There are many novels, of course, from which death would be a welcome relief, but I have never read more than a dozen pages of any book that did not interest me from the start, and I should hate to get fairly going in one that did interest me, and then have to knock off because the Grey Man had made up his mind it was time for us to be off. So, when I feel up to it, as just now, I write to you, and when I don't feel up to it, I just think, think, think. There is a dreadful lot of thinking to be done when the time for it is limited. And the 'thinks' usually have to do with things that have happened—hardly at all are they concerned with the inscrutable future.

It is a strange thing that—of all I have seen in a somewhat varied career, about to end at the age of thirty-five—those events and scenes having to do with its first fifteen years are more real and vivid to me now than any of those of the last twenty. Pictures of little things that happened when I was a boy, bits

of scenery, chance words and phrases of people who are dead, sounds, smells, and dreams—all the sensual and spiritual impressions of those years crowd in upon me in these last days. They come back with startling realness. It is as if subconsciousness had opened by chance a lost dispatch-box, in which were stored away documents, plans, and photographs concerning affairs and people long since almost forgotten. For it *is* startling when a lost hour suddenly resurrects itself without any reason.

This morning, I was riding across the Big Hill Flat with George Dawson, who carried that old twelve-shot Winchester which you will remember my father gave me on my twelfth birthday. What a noble weapon it was—when it was new! The Big Hills on the left were glowing with sunshine. On the right the Cow Hill towered up, and away down to our right rear, beyond the nestling Green Hills, stretched the three long indigo humps of the Lagoon Mountain. There was a blue sky, and it was very hot. An eagle hawk swooped and circled overhead, and the impetuous George let fly a bullet at her. His chestnut pony 'Tommy' immediately threw up his head and bolted, and when I caught them up at the Cow Paddock gate, George

was kicking him in the ribs, and swearing in that peculiar Scotch fashion which rendered him famous. You remember the remarkable formula he made use of when he deemed it expedient to consign any person or object to eternal torment? Since he died, I have never heard it, yet I could this morning, as distinctly as I had—let me see—twenty-two years ago at the gate; could see George's face all wrinkled about the mouth under his sandy moustache; could see Tommy backing, and rearing, and snorting; could hear the little gum saplings that grow by the gate rustling in the warm breeze; could feel my sides aching with laughter; could smile at George's own good laugh as the outburst ended.

There was another bit of that country—the most beautiful country in the world—that has haunted me, too. You remember the track into the homestead by way of the Gap and Bossley's Gully? Well, if you are riding home in the evening, you remember the last flat-topped hill-crest before you come down towards Bately's hut—old Bately and all his wives who haunted him and the place—and the view of the valley you get from it? The picture has obsessed me at intervals all day. The wide valley, dim in the short twilight; the long,

deep blue ranges on the other side; the line of yellow sandstone cliffs that limits the valley; the blaze of red and orange, fading into yellow, and then into the greenish-blue of the night that creeps up from eastward to the deep, cold zenith; the hundred voices of the Bush at eventide; the cool breeze that sighs up from the lowlands; the blue curl from your pipe in the clear air; the glad sense of health, and strength, and hope that is yours as you ride down the hill-side. Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy—I'd like to ride there just once, just once again before I book my berth in the Styx Navigation Company's boat; but it's

'Eheu, fugaces, Postume, Postume,
Labuntur anni, nec pietas moram
Rugis et instanti senectæ
Afferet indomitæque morti.'

I'm afraid, though, that there isn't much 'pietas' to make claim for even one extra hour for me. (Forgive that bit of pedantry—it isn't really such, for Mr. Q. H. Flaccus and I have always been pals, through both good and evil report. There's a sigh about that Ode that fits me just now.)

Once I had a dream that impressed me deeply. It was at the old place, just after the

war, and not long after my father had died. It repeated itself last night, I think—or, maybe, I remembered it as I lay half asleep. I had come suddenly from I don't know where into a large kind of dining-room, where was a long wood table, and, seated at it, all the people I had ever known intimately who were dead. Seeing them again gave me a great amount of pleasure, and I was in no way troubled as to how they came there. There was my mother, whom I only remember, as a very little boy, for a gentle, sweet-faced woman; there was my father and my grandmother, old George Dawson, Rupert, Uncle Peter in all his grandeur, little Billy Noggs, who died at school of pneumonia; Reg Fox, who died on the troopship during the voyage to the Cape; many who had been killed in South Africa—they were all there: all the people 'gone over the border' whom I had ever been personally interested in. I was tremendously pleased and happy—but somehow they didn't seem to be so enthusiastic about seeing me. They had an air of giving me the cold shoulder. Evidently they had been talking before I came in, but now they all seemed to be silently waiting until I should go out before they should speak again. It puzzled me and hurt

me. I went to her who was dearest to me of them all, and spoke, but she made no answer: only her dear old face softened, and those splendid, wise, brave old eyes filled as she looked. I went to Rupert—can't you see the way he used to stand, looking like a young Knight of the Round Table? I said something to him, but he only looked at me in the same strange way, and made no answer. My mother, my father—none of them would speak a word to me. I stood and wondered for a while, and then, full of sorrowful bitterness, turned to go. At the door I stopped and looked at them again. They were all smiling after me—not laughing at me, but smiling their friendship and love and good-will; and then, in a flash, it came to me—the reason why they could not speak to me. They were of the dead, and I of the living, and between the two no speech can ever be. So I went away, glad and happy, at any rate, for having seen them all again. And then I woke up.

I wonder will there be a place for me at that long table? God knows. I wish I could believe it, as some people believe in a heaven and a hell. It would do me all the good in the world to believe something of the kind—but I can't, and there's an end of it. I always

have had a constitutional difficulty in persuading myself with regard to such matters. Otherwise I'd have had a religion, and a proper sort of death-bed; and, maybe, I wouldn't have been such a vagabonding blackguard all my days, or have done such shabby things, as I have sometimes done.

For I believe in religion, Jimmy. It may seem queer to you my saying this, since you know how little I've ever had of it, and have often heard me laugh at it, and sometimes sneer—but, all the same, I do—'I do so,' as Johnny Watts used to say. I don't think the world would be anywhere without it. It is my own misfortune—perhaps the greatest of many—that I could never find anything in it for myself. All the best people I have ever known have been religious. I don't mean 'pi,' you know, but rather that they have been successful in convincing themselves of the absolute truth of their tenets, and have lived up to the principles of their schools of thought, and with the greatest comfort and satisfaction to themselves. Now, here am I dying, without a single definite belief in anything, except the fact that I know nothing; with nothing at all to sustain me, except a sense of humour; with no hope of an eternal

life, except that which may be derived from a knowledge of the physical law that matter is indestructible. I have no idea of meeting all those dear people at the long table after I am dead. Perhaps I shall, perhaps I shan't—I dunno. But, take it from me, Jimmy, old lad —I'd give everything (if I had anything to give) to believe as certainly and surely as my grandmother, my mother, my father, Rupert, believed in a real and definite after-life. But I can't, and that's all there is about it. I must just take what comes, and make no complaint. There is only one thing that pleases me in this connexion at the eleventh hour—I am not a beastly Atheist.

* * * * *

After I wrote that yesterday, Jimmy, I fainted. I don't know whether such a tremendous avowal was too much for my system, but anyway, I've come to again—much to my surprise, for I really thought I was 'deaded.' But I'm terribly weak now, and the end can't be far off. It is all I can do to scribble this—it will probably be more than you can do to read it. The doc. says I mustn't write; but what's an hour or two when one's got all Eternity before one? Will do as I dam' well please, just to show my

robust independence. But I don't think Carrots minds very much. I have already written a brief good-bye to Jan Potgieter.

What I want to jot down now is just my last wish. Of course I don't ask you to see that it's carried out; but if you did, it might give you some amount of satisfaction afterwards. It won't, of course, make the slightest difference to me, really. I won't know—or at least I don't know whether I'll know—if you do it or not.

In due course I'll be laid out straight, washed, and stuck into a coffin. Then they'll plant me in some suburban cemetery near London. I'll rot. Most of my chemical constituents will have been added to the soil of England by the time you would be able to do what I ask; but, nevertheless, there would be some of me left, if only bones. Now, I would like you, old boy, to have my bones dug up and planted 'on the other side.' I want, if I can, to do a little 'daisy growing' in my own country. Pack my skeleton in a gin-case if you like, and chuck it down an empty mine-shaft; but, if you can, do see to it that I may decompose ultimately into Australian soil.

* * * * *

I am very tired now, Jimmy boy, and feeling a little weary about things. Can't be much longer. Can't see very clearly. No pain. Time to be off. Grey Man walking up and down. Four-wheeler at the door. Tickets all taken. Charing Cross to Hades. Wonder if Cook's coupons hold good? Buck up, old stick-in-the-mud. There is something else——

I want to tell you, Ji . . .

[*John Mason was found leaning over the last unfinished sheet of this letter. He lies in Waverley Cemetery, Sydney.—*ED.]

THE END

BILLING AND SONS, LTD., PRINTERS, GUILDFORD

00094309

Digitized with financial assistance from
Shri Brihad Bhartiya Samaj
on 20 February, 2020